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by WALT COBURN

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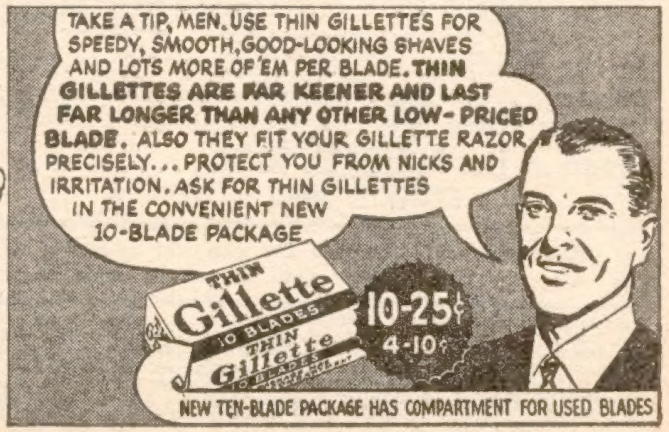
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IN THE SADDLE

DID you see where Great Britain's roped a newfangled idea called socialized medicine, and is trying it out for size these days? Seems that teeth, wigs and wooden legs are all "free" to the hombres who need 'em, and have their dues paid up. Some folks opine that America will adopt this form of health insurance and protection some time. If we do we'll sure as hell have changed a heap from our fire-eating, gun-toting, whiskey-guzzling forbears. In that rugged period your medicine wasn't socialized—it wasn't even civilized! Let's look at the case of one Long Sam Bolliver, a California old-timer.

Bolliver, a tall-timber trapper, had his leg badly shattered by a bullet in a border barroom brawl. Even Bolliver could see there was no alternative but to ampute the leg, but there wasn't any surgeon, not to mention a doctor, within hundreds of miles. So Long Sam, maybe a little short on brains but plenty long on guts, sharpened the blade of his Bowie knife, filed the handle end into a makeshift saw, and with the cold, iron nerve of a mountain man, went to work on himself.

He cut through the shattered flesh with the knife, sawed through the bone, and then, after a chore that would have caused most men to lose consciousness, calmly seared the blood vessels with a red-hot poker. Later, he made his own wooden leg—the non-socialized medicine brand—fitted it, and in 1866 was still living out his days in California.

With pill-rollers scarce as hen's teeth, the men of the old frontier had to be tough if they wanted to live. The famous Jim Bridger had, within a period of four years, taken a total of two quiverfuls of arrows into his hide, but the wounds never seemed to bother the old warhorse.

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(Please turn to page 98)

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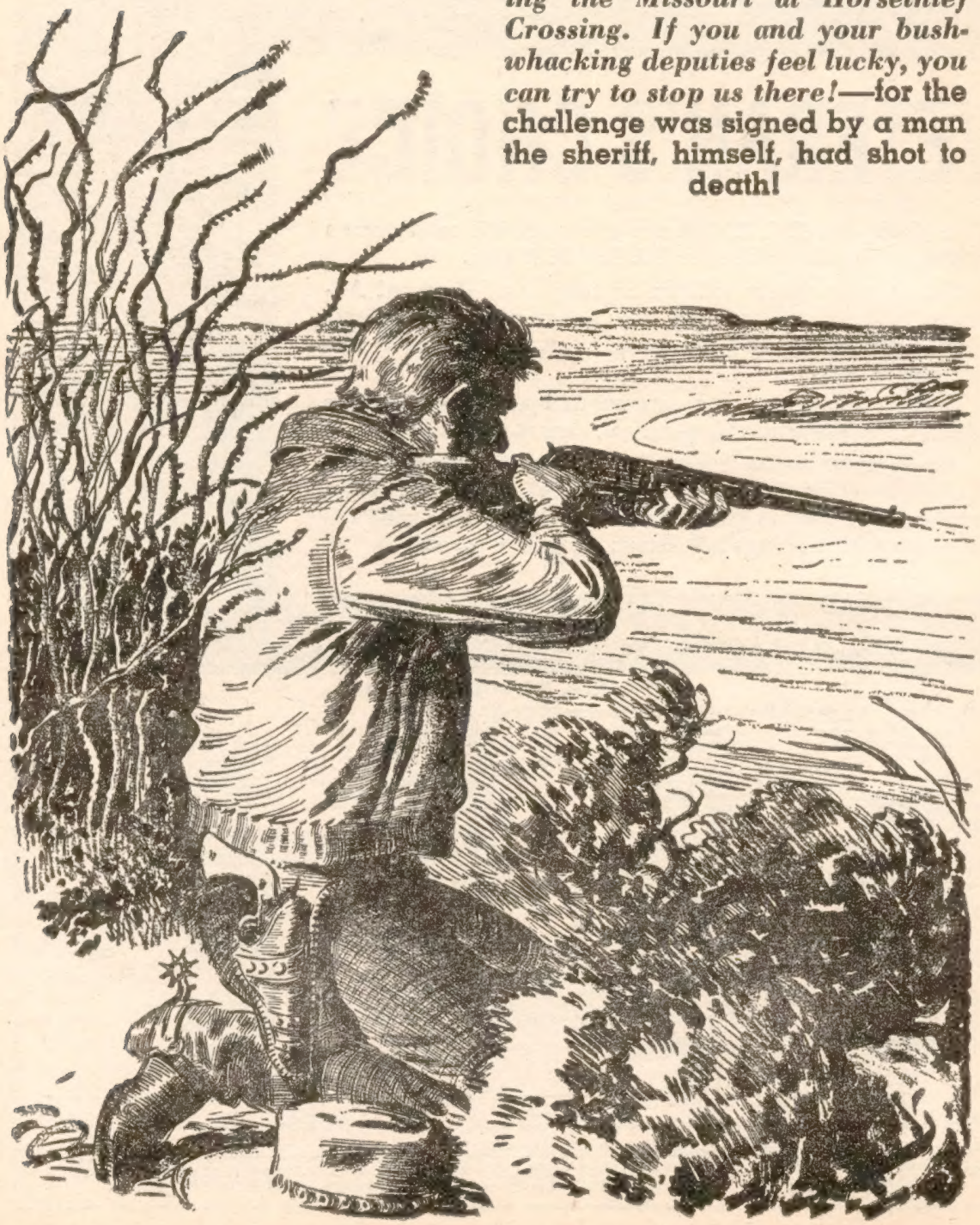
WHEN THE

The breath of Boothill and fear of God hit Sheriff Buck Wear when he got the message: *We, the Badlands Gang, will be fording the Missouri at Horsethief Crossing. If you and your bushwhacking deputies feel lucky, you can try to stop us there!*—for the challenge was signed by a man the sheriff, himself, had shot to death!

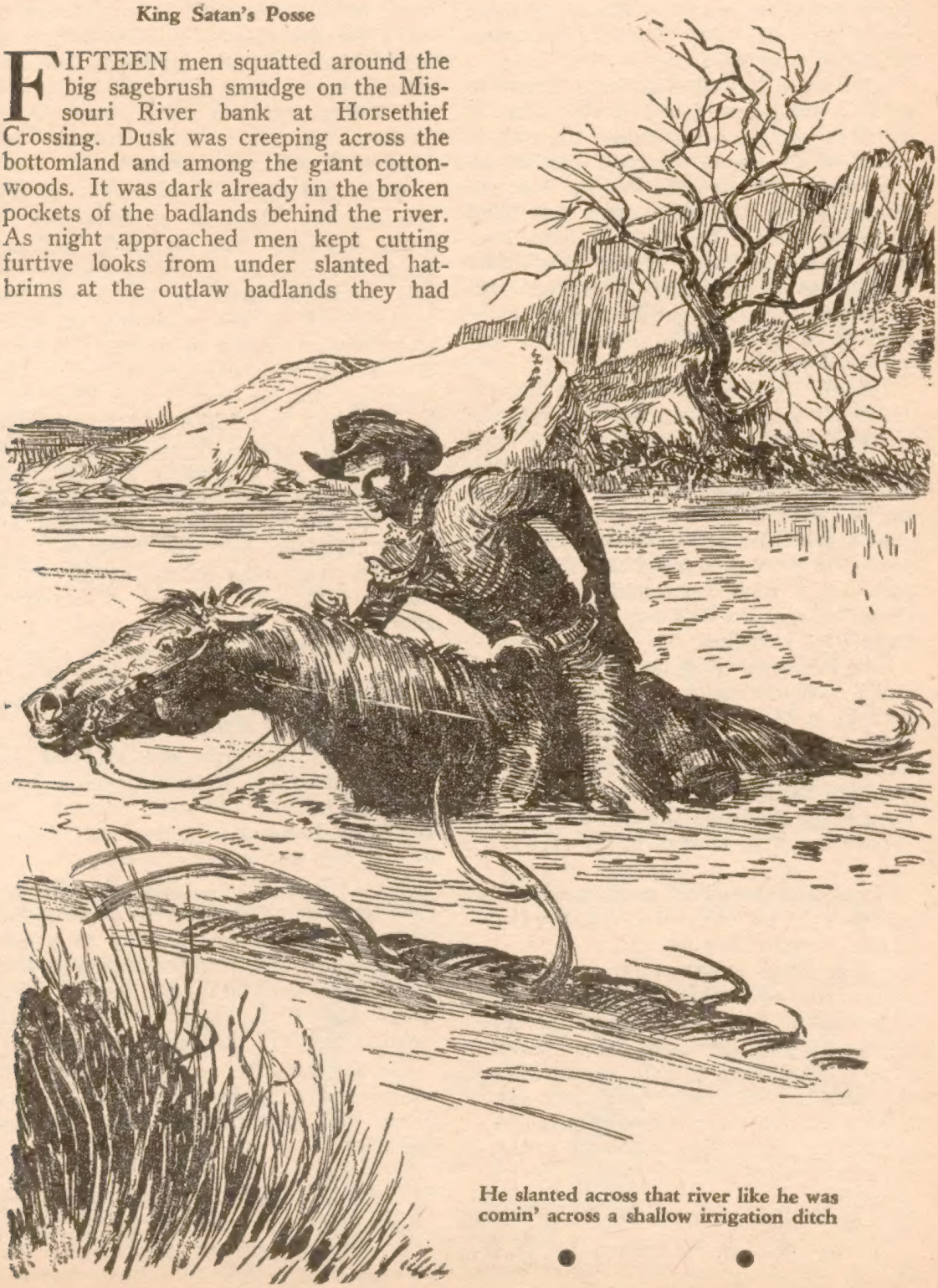


GUN-DEVIL LAUGHED

CHAPTER ONE

King Satan's Posse

FIFTEEN men squatted around the big sagebrush smudge on the Missouri River bank at Horsethief Crossing. Dusk was creeping across the bottomland and among the giant cottonwoods. It was dark already in the broken pockets of the badlands behind the river. As night approached men kept cutting furtive looks from under slanted hatbrims at the outlaw badlands they had



He slanted across that river like he was comin' across a shallow irrigation ditch

crossed that day. Sheriff Buck Wear and his posse were on a man hunt, toting bench warrants for members of the notorious Badlands Gang of train robbers.

THE GREATEST MAN HUNT IN THE HISTORY OF MONTANA! So the home-town newspaper, the Big Coulee *Enterprise*, headlined it in big print.

The posse looked like some round-up outfit moving into camp on the river. A chuck wagon, loaded under the supervision of the-round up cook, carried an assortment of Sheriff Wear's favorite canned goods. A bed wagon was piled with the men's bedrolls; it also bore cases of ammunition. A keg of whiskey was in the chuck wagon. There was also a remuda of good saddle horses commandeered by sheriff's order from cow outfits along the way.

Sheriff Buck Wear was a big man, a six-footer weighing two hundred pounds. Broad-shouldered and tough. Florid, with thick curly hair and eyes set under black brows. His trimmed mustache was waxed at the ends; Wear was a ladies man. A good bronc rider, he had worked the rough string for big outfits, had won a few fights, built up a tough rep and got himself elected sheriff on that rep. He had guts despite his bragging.

The Badlands Gang had held up a train down in Wyoming. A week later they had held up a bank. Rumor said they were headed north for Canada. And, to top it off, there was a page advertisement on the inside of the Big Coulee *Enterprise* in the form of the challenge to Wear and his two deputy sheriffs. It said, in big type:

> TO SHERIFF BUCK WEAR AND HIS TWO DEPUTY SHERIFFS, TEXAS TANNER AND DWIGHT RUDELL.
>
> WE, THE UNDERSIGNED MEMBERS OF THE BADLANDS GANG WILL BE CROSSING THE WIDE MISSOURI AT HORSETHIEF CROSSING AND WE'RE SOUTH AMERICA BOUND. IF YOU AND YOUR BUSHWHACKING DEPUTIES AND AS MANY OF YOUR HIRED KILLERS AS YOU CAN GET FOR A POSSE, FEEL LUCKY, YOU CAN TRY TO STOP US THERE.

It was signed by the leader, Bill Travis, and by surviving members: Dutch Mike, Harvey Ball and Hank Jackson. The last name on the list was The Ghost of the Badlands Kid.

But the Badlands Kid was dead, Wear was willing to swear. He had put it down in writing and had sworn to the word and letter of that statement in an attempt to claim the five thousand dollar reward on Pete Thrash, alias the Badlands Kid. The statement had given a detailed account of the killing and had been sworn to by Wear's deputies, Texas Tanner and Dwight Rudell, eye witnesses.

Wear had killed Thrash while he was crossing the Missouri on horseback in broad daylight. The Badlands Kid had been shot from his saddle in mid-stream. His horse, spooked by the firing, had turned back at the splashing of water kicked up in his face by bullets. To make certain the Kid was not still alive and hanging onto his horse's tail, Wear and his deputies had killed the horse. The animal had floated down-stream a mile and landed on a sandbar, the Badlands Kid's saddle gun still in the scabbard. Tied to the saddle-horn had been his filled cartridge belt and holstered six-shooter. Tied also by the saddle string was Pete Thrash's new pair of shopmade alligator boots. They'd been removed so they wouldn't fill with water in case he had to swim for it. Belt and gun had been removed because the weight might have burdened the swimmer.

Moreover, the river was at flood. No human, mortally wounded, could have survived in that cold swift current. The Badlands Kid's carcass had rotted long months ago in the river depths.

Weeks later, a few miles below Horsethief Crossing, Wear and his deputies had located the decomposed body of a man they claimed had been the Badlands Kid. They'd filed a claim for the reward. Then they'd fetched the Badlands Kid's sweetheart to identify the remains.

To the surprise and bewilderment of some—and to the disgust of many—Travis Jones had identified the body of Pete Thrash.

TRAVIS JONES had been named Travis before she was born, by her squawman father, Jackson Jones, who had pioneered into Montana with his partner Bill Travis. The unborn had been named

for Travis. Later Travis turned outlaw and the Badlands Kid was the youngest and wildest of his outlaw gang. In cow-country opinion the girl's identification was akin to sacrilege.

Especially in view of the fact that Sheriff Buck Wear was paying the pretty half-breed court. He'd been taking her to the dances and picnics. He was a constant visitor to Travis where she lived with her Assiniboine squaw mother at the Jackson Jones ranch ten miles below Horsethief Crossing. She'd done a good job of ranching after her father's death. Jackson Jones had wanted a son. When his baby was born a girl that tough old river rancher had done his best to make a cowhand out of her and she did not disappoint him. Travis Jones was a natural.

Now the manhunters rode down the gumbo ridge to the bottomlands. All were forking played-out horses when they reached camp. Their empty bottles had long since been thrown away and the whiskey they'd drunk since sunrise was dead in their guts. Their bellies were filled with nausea. Their horses turned loose and fresh night horses caught up and hobbled out on picket ropes, they tapped the keg and rekindled the dead booze inside them. Tipsy, they'd tied into the grub, fighting off swarms of mosquitoes at the same time.

Some possemen had worn mosquito netting rolled like a hatbrim around their hats. Finished with grub, they undid the netting and tied it down for a loose fitting veil over their heads to protect neck and face. The horse wrangler cut green sagebrush and built a smudge and they kept piling on fuel until the yellowish smoke was a dense cloud. The men gathered as close to the smudge as they could get without choking. A little drunk, grub taking the wrinkles out of their bellies, rolling and smoking cigarettes. They began bragging on toughness, each trying his damndest to top the tall tale of the other.

"Tell us again," said grizzled and tipsy Pat Conley, "how you killed the Badlands Kid, Sheriff. Mebbyso some of these tough hombres ain't heard how you got the job done. Cut loose with both barrels, Bucky!"

Conley had joined the posse for five bucks a day and free booze. He'd punched cows with most of the Badlands Gang before they took to the outlaw trail. He was red Irish and you could never tell when he was ribbing a man. Conley was hell for joshing. Gray sprinkled his hair and he was stove-up and walked with a limp. But he still rode broncs and was able to take his own part in any kind of a ruckus. Save for an old long-barreled wooden-handled six-shooter he packed tucked in the waistband of his levi overalls, he was unarmed. He used no saddle gun and carried only a few extra cartridges in his pocket.

"Tell her shore scary, Bucky, how you killed the Badlands Kid. Right here at this Horsethief Crossin' on the big wide Missouri."

Dusk had fallen. Stars were commencing to dot the cloudless sky. Glowing coals threw a dull red glow across the men who gathered around the smudge so close their eyes grew watery from the yellow smoke. The loose remuda, the hobbled horses and those on the picket ropes moved close in behind the men, tails lashing out to switch off the mosquitoes.

Sheriff Buck Wear, as easily flattered and toadied-to as he might be, squinted into the dense smudge that hid Conley. He was suspicious of the man. No love was lost between the two. Conley held the law, as it was enforced by Wear, in fine contempt. When he painted the town red Pat was wont to buck his horse down the street and ride in and out of one saloon after another until he had taken his first drink a-horseback from every bar along the double row of the saloons that lined Big Coulee's main street. Then, afoot, and his horse cared for, Conley would settle down to his spree. A free spender, he had the knack of making his town money last, and more than often he would sit into a poker game and build up his dwindling town money. About the time you figured him too drunk to tell a full house from a bobtailed flush, he'd rake in a jackpot, thank the boys for the donation, push back his chair and return to his drinking.

Conley might rib a fight but when it got to be a ruckus he eased into the role of spectator. He'd be sitting on the bar with a bottle in his hand, cheering both sides. But crowded into a ruckus, he was a hard man to whip. Conley had deputized

himself as one of Sheriff Wear's posse.

"All you got, Bucky, is a gatherment of these poolroom cowboys and barflies," he'd said. "They'll git lost if you lead 'em off the main street. The whole mess'll spook till they scatter like the milltails of hell if ever they ketch sight of one of the Badlands Gang. Besides, you'll be needin' somebody to pick up yore dead."

"Any time I need a half-witted clown like you along, I'll hire me one from a circus. This posse is full handed."

"Then I'll throw in with it." There was a look in Pat Conley's green eyes that gave the lie to his wide grin, "I'm a-reppin' for the Badlands Gang."

The crowd there in the saloon where Wear was organizing his posse got a laugh out of that. The sheriff's grin was forced.

"I maintain that every law posse," Conley enlarged on the idea, "should have a representative from the outlaw outfit. I'm goin' along as the outlaw rep."

Now Wear tried to peer through the dense smudge. According to Wear's written statement sworn to and carefully rehearsed by himself and his deputies, Wear made himself out a rather modest but fearless hero. Drunk or sober, the sheriff's story varied in only minor details, backed always by Tanner and Rudell.

"There ain't much to tell," Sheriff Wear, flanked now by his deputies, began. "It happened this-away. . . ."

THERE was a feeling of uneasiness in each man. The silence of the night was broken only by the hum of mosquitoes, the swishing of horses tails, the stomping of shod hoofs and the mournful chuckle of the river.

"Sounds fer all the world," said Pat Conley, breaking the silence, "like the muttering of men drowned deep in the ol' Missouri a-talkin' 'er over. Listen close enough, the old time rivermen say, on a night like this, and the river talks to you. Them river rats claim to savvy the language. They claim the drowned whisper it at night while they set on the bank with their fishin' poles and their hooks baited for catfish.

"Let a man git drowned, them river rats claims, and there ain't never so much as a nibble fer nights afterwards. Till them catfish has nibbled the last shred of meat from the drowned man's bones. And there's no use goin' to the fuss an' bother of baitin' the hooks, set on a trot-line stretched across the river, when they ain't a-baitin' and the current gradually washes the bait away.

"But the river rats set all night just the same with their fishin' poles and a jug on the river bank, a-nibblin' at their crock of river likker and a-dozin' and a-listenin' to the drowned man tell his story of the why and the wherefor of his drowndin'. The river tells it to the bank while the river rat ranchers listen.

"Hell, excuse me fer interruptin' your yarn, Sheriff. I've put in so damn many years in line-camps along the ol' river I'm part river rat at that. I've catfished on a night with a crock of river likker alongside me on the bank and ketched myself a-listenin' to the river talk of them drownded men. I was camped below Horsethief Crossin' after the killin' of the Badlands Kid. Settin' on the bank with a-fishin' pole in my hand but the water was too muddy for catfish anyway, but it give me somethin' to while away the night time till sleep come. A-listenin' to the ol' river tell it to the bank about the killin' of the Badlands Kid.

"But hell, Bucky, it ain't fer me to run off at the head! Maybe it's because I'm red Irish and superstitious and a leetle oiled on river likker, but my tale kin wait. It's your story, Sheriff. Tell 'er to us the way it happened. And flankin' you is them two eye witnesses, Mister Texas Tanner and Mister Dwight Rudell. Give us the truth, the whole truth, and nothin' but the truth, so help ye God. Have at it, Sheriff!"

The night was warm. The heat of the smudge made it warmer. Sweat beaded on Sheriff Wear's face, and in the dull red glow the beaded sweat looked like drops of blood. He shivered. There was a cold lump in his belly. He drained the whiskey in his tin cup, cutting a look at each deputy in turn.

Texas Tanner's black-stubbled face was grim, and his beady eyes shifty. Dwight Rudell, tow-headed and sandy-mustached, had his head cocked sideways, listening. Both deputies had drawn six-shooters. They were sharing the sheriff's uneasiness. Wear slid his gun from its carved leather

holster. The grip in his sweaty palm was reassuring.

That damned Pat Conley, who'd horned his way in on this posse! The outlaw rep, with his damned locoed river rat talk! Half drunk, he'd been stringing these men along with his damned lies. Baiting Wear. That was a direct challenge to the law. He'd half spooked these possemen with a lot of lies till they were on edge. Wear reached for the jug and spilled whiskey into his tin cup.

Somewhere in the night a horned owl boomed. The possemen stiffened.

Pat Conley chuckled. "Ain't you gentle Annies never heard the owl hoot?" Conley cupped his hands to his mouth and repeated the call.

The night gave back a faint echo. Silence fell for a moment. To be broken by Tanner. "I kin smell a gun trap, Buck. That damn' Conley is in on it. That was no owl."

There was a splash down the river. Each man clawed for his gun.

Conley's derisive chuckle sounded. "First time a beaver flaps his tail," the redhead sneered, "this brave posse outfit is rearin' to quit the country. Better rub that rabbit's hind foot you pack, Texas. That sound you're a-hearin' is your heart a-thumpin' ag'in your ribs, Rudell. Now swaller some of that bravemaker and tell us a story, Sheriff. And you better pass the crock to keep your fearless manhunters from plumb stompedin'."

Those who had jumped to their feet were shamed back on their bootheels by Conley's taunts. Pat piled on more sagebrush for the smudge. "Tell 'er scary, Sheriff. When you're done I'll tell what the ol' river told her banks one night."

Sheriff Wear gulped whiskey from his tin cup. He was scared. Texas might be right. It smelled like a gun trap. Suddenly the number of deputies seemed to have increased. But it was hard to get a count. The sheriff couldn't recall how many men he had deputized. They were all grimed by smudge smoke. Flanking him were his two trusted deputies; they were the only faces he could recognize. There was no way to prevent any outsider filtering in with the possemen. They were all partly drunk and working on booze to keep up their nerve. By the hell, Texas Tanner, for all his rabbit's foot superstition, could be more right. That was no beaver slapping its tail. Sounded more like a swimming horse lunging ashore with a rider forking his back or clinging to his tail.

FOR A MOMENT Wear felt himself gripped by fear. He had to fight it down and it took all the guts he had. He was no man's damned coward. But he couldn't fight something he couldn't see. To Wear the whisper of the river water against the clay cut bank was like muttering human voices.

He thought of whispering to Tanner and Rudell for each to whisper to the man next to him to have him identify himself. But then he decided against the notion. It would be lighting the fuse of fear in them. What if the man next to him proved to be a stranger, one of the outlaw gang? The result would be disastrous. They'd panic.

There was only a silence now that was crawling and alive with fear. By the hell, there were some of those men squatted around the smudge who weren't posse members. The sheriff would have sworn it. In the few breaks of the smoke, that squat, heavy-set man with the black mosquito netting looked like Dutch Mike. The tall, slim man could be Harvey Ball. Yonder might be big Hank Jackson. And that shadowy figure might be the grizzled Bill Travis, standing there spread-legged, the dense smoke billowing around his rawboned six-foot frame. All were masked by that damned black mosquito netting. Wear was actually recognizing those men or his imagination, warped by booze, was playing tricks on him.

But no one resembled Pete Thrash. He looked for some one who might pass for the Badlands Kid and when he found no one he let out a relieved sigh. He was about to call his deputies' attention to those who might be outlaws when Pat Conley bellowed:

"Jug's gone dry, Sheriff!" he called across the smudge. "Fill 'er up afore the booze in these fearless fellers dies out an' they commence a-diggin' their coyote holes and crawlin' in to pull the holes in after 'em. These poolroom cowboys needs their brave-maker."

Sheriff Buck Wear had given orders to keep hands off the whiskey keg. When

the jug needed refilling he, the sheriff, would attend to it.

The keg was in the mess wagon. The wagon stood a hundred feet from the smudge and there was that distance to cross in the pitch black darkness. Sheriff Wear didn't relish that trip.

But on the other hand it gave him the chance he wanted—the chance to find if men of the Badlands Gang were among his own outfit. He could walk around behind the circle surrounding the smudge and get a tally on his men.

"Come along, Texas." Wear got to his feet, his gun in his hand. "You too, Dwight."

Then he dropped his voice to a whisper so that only the deputies heard. "Git a count on these hombres," he said softly. "Might be a few strays slipped into the posse." Then, in a louder voice: "Whose got the empty crock?"

"I got it," Conley said. "She's milked dry."

Slowly the sheriff walked behind the circle, deputies behind him. As they passed along they stared down, narrow-eyed, to scrutinize each man. But Conley had piled more green sagebrush on the smudge; smoke was so thick that men went crawling away, others got to their feet and were milling around to avoid the smoke.

"Want to smoke us out, Conley?" one man bawled. "Lay off a-stackin' 'er so damn high."

"Here's the dry crock, Bucky." Pat Conley shoved the jug at the sheriff. "Beats hell how a sagebrush smudge will fetch in anything that's being pestered by them big Missouri River muskeeters. Wild horses will come to stand close where the smudge is the thickest, and I'll gamble there's more than several shore wild outlaw broncs mixed in with the cavvy if a man could see 'em in the dark, and a man could walk up to any of them wild 'uns and they'd never untrack. Wild varmints, to boot. Bobcats and them timid white-tail deer, and skunks, and mebbyso even a mountain lion, gittin' them damned pesky river muskeeters smudged off." Pat Conley's chuckle was ominous.

"Mebbyso even wild outlaws. When I tried to git a count on this outfit of pool-room cowboys you deputized fer a posse, seems like they was tallyin' out twice the number we left town with. By grab, you might have somethin' there, Sheriff. Smudge 'em up close enough and you might just ketch the whole Badlands Gang here in the smudge-trap. Might even ketch the Ghost of the Badlands Kid. Or is ghosts muskeeter proof, Texas?"

Texas Tanner snarled a curse.

Rudell told Wear to fetch the jug and they'd tap the keg. He was fed up with listening to that mouthy shanty Irishman run off at the head.

Wear, Rudell and Tanner melted into the darkness, traveling close, stumbling in the dark. When they reached the mess wagon the sheriff held the mouth of the jug under the keg spigot.

"You fellers git a count on 'em?"

"Hell no," Texas cussed. "With 'em millin' around. Close as I come to a tally, is there's half a dozen more'n we left town with."

"We picked up some strays," Rudell said. "But they might be them river half-breeds. Them 'breeds kin shore smell a likker keg."

"It's the Badlands Gang," said Wear. "Bill Travis, Dutch Mike and Harvey Ball and Hank Jackson . . . They're all here. . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

Target for a Boothill Gunman

DEPUTY SHERIFF DWIGHT RUDELL didn't believe in ghosts. Nor was Rudell of the opinion that they'd meet Bill Travis and his gang at Horsethief Crossing. But he kept his mouth shut. And let Tanner get as spooky as he damn' please.

Dwight Rudell was dangerous—and treacherous. He was close-mouthed and kept out of trouble. He believed in walking slow and speaking easy. Let Buck Wear do the spur-jangling. Let the quick-triggered Tanner do the sheriff's gun work when the job was too dirty for him to touch. Rudell played his cards close to his belly. He had a covetous eye on the sheriff's star.

Rudell had, for instance, plied the whiskey-loving editor of the Big Coulee *Enterprise* with good whiskey and they'd

gotten on a quiet two man drunk together. Before the night was over the editor had let Rudell in on a practical joke on Wear.

According to the newspaperman, it was one of Pat Conley's practical jokes. Conley hated Wear's guts as a man and as a peace officer. With election coming up, Conley came to the editor with an idea that would knock the political props out from under Wear, so far as his chances for re-election were concerned.

"Run this paid ad," Conley had said, "in a special extra edition. I got her all wrote out—give her a full page. I got the dough to lay on the line fer this challenge to Wear." Conley had the folding money.

"If Wear falls fer this, and I'm gamblin' on it, his goose is cooked to a burnt crisp. When him and his poolroom cowboy posse of boot lickers comes back to town empty-handed, and nothin' bigger than Missouri river muskeeters to fight off, and it turns out to be one hell of a joke on Wear, they'll give him the horse laugh.

"They'll laugh him out of the sheriff's job and horse laugh that glory hunter plumb out of the cow-country. That bounty-collectin' son of a snake will have to travel a long, long distance yonderly to git away from the far echoes of that big horse laughter. Are you game? And kin you keep your trap shut?"

For that much jug money the newspaperman would, he told Pat Conley, burn a church. Besides, he bore no brotherly love for Sheriff Wear.

Conley knew the Badlands Gang as well as any man could, and he told the newspaperman that Travis and the rest were on their way to South America. They had their stake made and wouldn't be fools enough to map their getaway route in newspaper print.

This was a pleasure trip for Deputy Rudell and he got a lot of amusement from watching the scared possemen. He alone shared Conley's amusement in the newspaper account of what the *Enterprise* proclaimed the greatest man hunt in the history of Montana. This gem had been written by the editor with tongue-in-cheek and a bottle of Conley's whiskey at his elbow.

Rudell might have confided in Conley. But the latter held Rudell in the same contempt as the sheriff and Tanner. But when it was all over and the empty handed posse was homeward bound, Rudell would tell Conley he'd been in on the josh from the start and had enjoyed the trip.

But now Rudell wasn't so sure of himself. Not so damned sure but what he had been used for a sucker. He had once sat in a poker game with Conley, who was apparently too drunk to read the cards, and bet his hand without looking at it, shoving his chips into the jackpot. And when all the chips were down, Conley, drunker than seven hundred dollars, turned over the winning hand and raked in the jackpot.

"RATTLE YOUR hocks, Sheriff Bucky!" called Conley from deep in the sagebrush smudge. "Before your poolroom posse dies on the vine fer lack of the brave-maker! Rally 'round the smudge, boys, and hear that fearless man hunter tell how Sheriff Bucky Wear killed the Badlands Kid!"

Wear tilted the jug and let the whiskey trickle down his gullet. "By the hell you want 'er told scary and by the hell you'll get 'er told scary!" Wear was getting drunk enough to drown the fear. Drunk and ugly-tempered, he'd taken about all a man could from that loud-mouthed red-headed Irishman. Let Conley crowd him much further and he'd get a bellyful of lead. He shoved the jug at Conley.

"That's the ticket, Bucky," Conley crowed. "These poolroom boys have heard it so often they know 'er by heart. But there's men amongst us tonight that will be a-listenin' to it, right from the fearless Sheriff Bucky Wear, fer the first time. So kick off the brakes and tell 'er shore scary. There's men here ain't heard it told, includin' perhaps mebbyso the Ghost of the Badlands Kid."

Conley stood half revealed in the thick smudge that billowed around him. He tilted the jug. "To the Ghost of the Badlands Kid!" He lowered the jug and stepped into the densest part of the smudge. He became lost to sight, the jug with him.

Wear stood there, flanked by his deputies. Something seemed to have happened to their possemen. They sat cross-legged, both hands in plain sight, for all the world

like so many smoked-up wooden images.

The sheriff had no trouble now getting an exact count on each man. They tallied fifteen, including cook and horse wrangler.

But somewhere behind them and hidden in the night that was thickened by the smudge pall, Pat Conley was passing the jug. There was a gurgling sound. A silence. Then another gurgling sound a little ways beyond. And so the jug was passed by that hidden outer circle.

Rudell was no longer sure of himself. He shared the same fear as Wear and Tanner.

Somewhere behind them the spurs of Conley tinkled mockingly. When he showed up he appeared from their other side. And shoved the jug at Sheriff Buck Wear with a chuckle.

"She's a little lowered, Sheriff Bucky," Conley grinned. "But there's still enough left in the jug fer a horn all around. It ain't every day them boys gits booze that's paid fer by John Law and out of the taxpayers pockets."

Wear hefted the jug and he guessed it to be half emptied. It was a gallon jug. So figure it out how many men had tilted it and calculate a quarter-pint a man for a big man-sized drink.

"Don't hog it." Conley stepped back into the smoke. "Take a dram and give your two eye witnesses a snort apiece. Then pass it along to that ring around the sagebrush smudge to keep up their fearless manhuntin' speerits."

When the sheriff and his deputies drank, the sheriff passed the jug to the nearest posseman squatted on the ground.

"What the hell ails you fellers?" Wear's voice had a croaking sound.

BUT none of the possemen answered. Fear was stamped on their faces and it glinted in their eyes.

"Wear will tell the story now about how he killed the Badlands Kid." The voice of Pat Conley came from behind them and out of the dense smudge smoke. It had a flat ominous sound.

"You'll stand there to tell us word fer word. You got it down and learned by heart and it's in that sworn statement you made when you filed the statement to collect the bounty on the Badlands Kid's dead carcass. You'll stand on your legs, Sheriff, and make that speech. And flankin' you on either side them two deputy eye witnesses will stand. And when you're done, they'll both raise their right hands and swear that you have told the truth, the whole truth and nothin' but the truth, so help ye God. You won't be interrupted by them as hasn't heard it, first hand. *Commence talkin'.*"

There was the dull metallic *click* of the gun in Conley's hand as he thumbed back the hammer of his old wooden-handled, long-barreled six-shooter to full cock.

Conley was hidden in the dense smoke but the sheriff knew he wasn't running a whizzer and that if the play was crowded that old six-shooter would explode and Wear would get shot.

Just as sure-certain were his two deputies Texas Tanner and Dwight Rudell, that they were in a tight and Pat Conley had the bulge. And they were both living on borrowed time.

This much Sheriff Wear could be sure of and he was willing to gamble all he had on it. That was the fact that Pete Thrash was dead. Wear in all sincerity was willing to gamble everything that he had told the truth and had taken a solemn oath to that grim fact.

Wear had watched him die in the swift muddy channel of the Missouri river. Wear had shot the Kid twice through the middle. He'd watched him reel like a drunken man and sort of slump over sideways and into the icy water and disappear beneath its muddy surface and never come up again. There were chunks of ice half submerged and honeycombed floating down with the flood water debris so that the water was ice cold and could chill a man's heart pulse while he drowned, and no man twice gut shot could have survived. To make certain he could not live long enough to be dragged ashore by his swimming horse, the sheriff and his deputies had shot the horse and watched the dead carcass float belly sideways downstream.

Wear stood with his six-shooter in his hand and his deputies flanking him on either side. He was half drunk and the booze fired his guts and gave him back something of his toughness. He cleared his throat with a loud hawking sound and spat.

"Like I wrote in that sworn statement," Wear picked up confidence from the bluster of his own voice, "I killed the Badlands Kid in self-defense. Any man claims it wasn't a fair gun fight is a damned liar!

"When I got word," the sheriff went on, "when I was tipped off to the information that the Badlands Kid was due to show up at the Horsethief Crossin', I taken my deputies along. I pulled out for Horsethief Crossin'. Tellin' nobody. We left town after dark and we reached the crossin' at daybreak. We loosened our saddle cinches and let the horses graze. And we sat around smokin' and augerin' and waitin'. And the longer we waited the more certain I felt that we'd bin tipped off wrong and it was another empty sack we was holdin' fer a snipe hunt.

"The river was up and overflowin' its bank and hunks of ice floatin' down. A mile wide and the current swifter'n the milltails of hell and it shore didn't seem likely that ary human on earth would be locoed or drunk enough to try to cross 'er a-horseback. Not even the Badlands Kid, river raised and forkin' the best river horse in the world, wasn't that locoed. And that's how me'n my two deputies was figgerin' it out. Thinkin' amongst the three of us that we'd had the ride for nothin'.

"THEN, yonder on the far bank and about a mile up-stream, we sighted the Kid on horseback. Ridin' down out of the badlands to the river. I had a pair of field glasses that picked him up plain. He got off his horse at the river bank and set down and pulled off his boots. I watched him tie his boots on his saddle. Then he checked his cartridge belt and holstered six-shooter and he checked the belt and his saddle-horn and looped his rope strap over it. Then he loosed his cinch and mounted. He was ridin' a big stout river horse and he rode into the shallow water and then the current ketched him and he slanted acrost that big wide river like he was comin' acrost a shallow irrigation ditch.

"The Kid had a laugh that once a man ever heard it, he'd never forget that laugh. There was nothing comical about the Kid's laugh. It begun quick and while it lasted, it sent a shiver along a brave man's backbone. And that laugh ended sudden. It started quick and was cut off sharp. And it chilled a man's blood. It had sounded when the Badlands Kid and his horse were out in the middle of the channel and the horse was swimming strong and swimming so high his rump showed and he wasn't even wetting the saddle skirts.

" 'I'm a-comin', Travis!' The Badlands Kid hollered out. He meant Travis Jones, his half-breed sweetheart. 'I'm a-comin' to git you, Travis! All hell and high water can't stop me!'

"And so help me, the Kid was shore a-comin'. There was no doubt about it.

"I told my deputies to stay where they was behind the brush. I told them not to fire a shot unless I was shot down and killed. Then the job was up to them.

"I quit the brush and walked out into the open. I walked slow towards the sandbar on this side where I figgered he would come ashore. I knelt there out in plain sight fer the Kid to sight me. And he shore did.

"I hollered as loud as I could beller it.

" 'You're under arrest, Kid! Come ashore with your hands in the air!' I hollered at him.

"His first shot cut a hole in the crown of my hat. He'd always bragged that he'd never be taken alive. The Kid was playin' fer keeps. He was playin' his tough string out.

"There was no two ways about that. I knelt there and I taken good aim and I commenced shootin'. My first shot hit the Kid in the belly. He doubled up and dropped over sideways. My next shot ketched him as he slid into the water. And he went under and out of sight.

"The shooting musta boogered his horse for he changed his swimmin' course and headed down-stream. On the odd chance he might be still alive and hangin' to the horse's mane, I told my two deputies to shoot the horse. When they balked at killin' the horse, I had to shoot that geldin' myself.

"I never regretted havin' to kill the Kid. I never lost ary sleep over killin' that tough outlaw kid. But by the hell I shore hated shootin' his horse."

Wear finished. He stood there with his

gun in his hand, looming up big and tough in the smudge smoke. He'd told it almost word for word as he had written it down in his sworn statement.

"You two deputies," the sheriff said, "seen it just as I told it. Ain't them the true facts, boys?"

"Told without the word of a lie," said Tanner, taking courage from the sheriff's bluster.

"Correct as hell," said Rudell.

"Travis Jones," said Wear, "identified the dead carcass as belongin' to Pete Thrash."

"That makes the Badlands Kid," Conley called, "legally dead."

"The Kid," said the sheriff flatly, "is legally dead."

"Amen," said Conley.

Then Conley, who was hell for practical joking, chuckled softly as if he were enjoying some sort of secret josh.

"Legally dead, you heard Sheriff Bucky here claim. And that five thousand dollar reward on the Kid, dead or alive and legally proven dead to the satisfaction of said law, laid on the line. That bounty money paid in full to Sheriff Buck Wear."

THERE in the smoke smudge that seemed to increase his bulk, Sheriff Wear seemed to shrink now. He cut his two flanking deputies quick, furtive looks. And if ever a man was branded and earmarked with guilt, it was the sheriff.

Tanner's teeth bared in a snarl. The gun in his hand swiveled to point at Sheriff Buck Wear.

"Looks like you bin holdin' out on us." Rudell spoke in a flat toned voice.

"Paid by check," Conley chuckled, "and Bucky lost no time a-gittin' it cashed. He's packin' that bounty money in his money belt. But don't take my word for it."

The deputies had guns pointed at Wear's belly. Sweat glistened on his face and his eyes shifted from one man to the other.

"Now hold on, boys! I ain't had time . . . I ain't had time to split it betwixt you boys. Don't go off half-cocked. You wouldn't—"

"Shut up," snapped Rudell. "You double crossin' son! Me'n Texas signed our names to a damned lie. Hell, you killed the Kid and that's no lie. But we watched you shoot him down in the middle of the river and you shot from the brush and never showed yourself. The Kid never had a gun in his hand. Later you set that hat of yours on a sagebrush and shot a hole in it. That extra gun scabbard the Kid had on his saddle was filled with extra boxes of ca'tridges he packed. You shot him down in cold blood. And when me'n Texas balked at killin' as game hearted a horse as ever busted the big Missouri wide open, you murdered that horse. You're as low down as they come, big mister. Killin's too quick for you. And if Bill Travis and his Badlands Gang is back yonder in the black shadows, all I ask is for them to turn this big-mouthed spur jingler over to me'n Texas."

"Fer hangin'?" Conley asked.

"Yeah. Fer hangin'." Tanner snarled.

"How about the brave and fearless possemen?" Conley cut in. "While you was fillin' the jug I told the poolroom cowboys that while they hugged the smudge there was a man standin' right behind each and every last one of 'em. And them men held no love for a deputized posseman. I said mebbyso if they all throwed away their guns and sat cross legged in a close circle they might live to see town again. They done just that."

"They got their fresh horses saddled," said Rudell. "Send the gutless sons back to town. Unless Travis and his gang wants to herd 'em all into the river."

"By now," Conley said, "Bill Travis and his gang are split up and quit the country and so far as I know they haven't set foot in Montana. They're long ago scattered and should meet when the sign is right somewhere in South America."

Pat Conley chuckled. And lifted his voice a little.

"Beats hell how these Missouri river 'breeds kin smell a likker keg. You've all heard Bucky tell it scary, boys. Come in out of the muskeeters and enjoy the smudge. One of you half-breed boys fill the jug. You know where the keg is in the mess wagon."

The river 'breeds came into the circle, white teeth grinning. But their eyes were wary. They all packed guns. And they all were taking their further orders from Pat Conley. And Pat Conley stayed back

fin the deep black shadow of the night.

"We're makin' a dance tomorrow night," said Conley. "We got a fiddle and we got the keg of likker. But if this poolroom cowboy posse gits nibblin' at it, there won't be enough to make the dance." His chuckle flattened. His voice was a toneless command.

"You 'breed boys. Collar the posse feller nearest you and kick him all the way to his horse. Put him straddle of his saddle and quirt him off on the trail to town. Any of you posse things tries to turn back will git what them two deputies is goin' to deal Wear for a hand. Now git to hell gone!"

Each 'breed grabbed a posseman and they were rough in their treatment of him. In less than a few minutes the entire posse was in the saddle and headed back for town and glad to be getting away with their lives. The sound of their shod hoofbeats faded into the night.

But none of the 'breeds came back to the smudge. They were out there in the night and were passing the jug. Nor did Pat Conley show himself. And there was a hushed silence.

CHAPTER THREE

The Executioner Is a Dead Man

THE only men visible in the red glow of coals under the sagebrush smudge were the sheriff and his two deputies. Wear could expect no mercy. Nobody had wanted the job of sheriff at Big Coulee and Buck Wear had bought his way in by buying drinks for the house along the rows of saloons, and when he announced his candidacy for the sheriff's office and elbowed the voters to the poles, marking the ballots for those who were too blind drunk to read, the cow country, careless about the bother of voting, had woke up to the fact too late that Buck Wear was wearing a badge.

The job had not paid much in salary. Tobacco money. But there were ways of picking up considerable in side money. He'd hired Texas Tanner, who had built up a tough rep as a hired killer during the range wars in Texas and New Mexico and Wyoming, for a deputy. Texas would shoot a man just to watch him kick, he bragged. He'd even shoot a wounded man.

Then Rudell had drifted into the country and had tackled the sheriff for a job. Rudell was an average forty a month cowhand. Mainly he worked with one outfit long enough to clean out the cowhands with a deck of marked cards or a pair of loaded dice. Then he'd pull out before they got their boneheads together and decided Rudell had cheated them out of their hard earned wages. So Rudell was first and last a tinhorn gambler.

Rudell had worked as a range detective for one of the big private detective agencies. And in the eyes of the cow-country no man can sink lower than a gent who wears a law badge pinned to his undershirt, and under the pretense of claiming to be a working cowboy or some cowhand who has gone wrong, will seek and find refuge in the outlaw hideouts, then betray that confidence those men have placed in him. Rudell had shown proof of his range detective job until he misused his law badge and had been fired, and Wear had hired the tinhorn because he needed such a man.

Wear had hired himself a cold-blooded killer in Texas Tanner. And he had hired a crooked tinhorn gambler and former range detective who was too low down for even that despised work.

Not content with the wages and graft, the two deputies wanted and demanded a cut of all bounty money and whatever Buck Wear could grab with greedy hands or in the way of easy money. The reward on the dead body of the Badlands Kid was to be split three ways. Sheriff Buck Wear had held out on the cut.

"Shed that money belt you got strapped on next to your mangy hide," Rudell said flat toned. "Use your left hand. Claw for a gun and it'll be to your sorrow. By rights, I got a big claim on it. It was my idea in the first place. I set the trap that ketched the Kid. He was holed up on the other side of the river, livin' the life of Riley. Crossin' over to this side while the river was froze over, to court his sweetheart at the Jones ranch. Then the ice broke up in the river and ketched him flat-footed on the yonder side. It was my idee to git word to him that Wear was makin' time with his gal. Ridin' plumb outa his way to stop at the Jones place.

I sent the Kid word that his sweetheart was havin' a tough time of it a-keepin' that amorous sheriff at arm's distance. And that Wear was usin' the threat that he knowed where the Kid was and if she didn't treat him purty he'd gather a posse and ride in on the Kid and smoke him out and kill him, trapped where his hideout was.

"My plan shore worked out, like I planned it. No man on earth would tackle that big river. But that's what the Kid did. Him and his horse busted the big Missouri river wide open like it was a wadin' crick.

"'I'm a-comin' to git you Travis!' Them's the last words the Kid lived to holler. 'All hell and high water can't stop me!'

"All you had to do, you big loud-mouthed son, was to squat safe in behind the brush and shoot him outa his saddle. And if you hadn't got the job done, then Texas woulda got the glory.

"Shed that money belt, you hold-out son!"

"Buck Wear never took stock in banks," Texas snarled. "He's packin' a lifetime's dirty blood money in that belt he's got strapped next to his mangy hide. There ain't a honest dollar in them pouches."

THEY had forgotten Pat Conley in their hatred for the sheriff who had held out on them in their greed for what Wear packed in his money belt. Pat Conley was the big practical josher and for a while this evening there in the smudge he'd built up a big scare and every man there had felt the fear chilling his guts. They'd thought themselves surrounded by Travis and his gang. Then they'd showed themselves and they had been no more than a bunch of river 'breeds whose ranches were strung along the river. A harmless 'breed bunch who even now were working as a haying crew to put up the crops at the winter line camps belonging to the big cow outfits. Tanner and Rudell had only contempt for the river 'breeds.

The two deputies dismissed Conley as harmless. He'd played his big josh on Wear and the only threat of fear Conley held over Tanner and Rudell, he himself had dissipated when he fetched his river 'breeds out of the smoke.

"What'll we do with Wear?" asked Rudell. "We'd be shovin' our necks in the low loop if we hung him."

"I got a notion beats that all to hell." Tanner's teeth bared in a flat-lipped grin. "Sheriff Buck Wear stinks. His sweaty hide stinks and his clothes give off an awful stink. Kin you smell it, Rudell? Only way fer the sheriff to git rid of that stench is a bath. He kin take a bar of soap and wade into the river with his boots on. When he's soaped hisself all over, then he can wade in deeper and right into the channel where she's swimmin' water. By the time he's swum the river acrost to the yonder side, I'll gamble he'll be shore clean!"

"I can't swim a damn lick!" Wear croaked. "You know I'm scared of water. I near drowned once when I was a kid. Shoot me. Git it done and over quick. You know I've never tackled the river even on the best water horse ever foaled. You know I'm scared of drownin'. I'll give you all I got in the world, and it's all in my money belt. Just shoot me in the back when I ain't expectin' it. But to hell with that damned black river. It's makin' that noise like Conley said, and the drownded men is chucklin' and a-coaxin' me into the water. Take my money—"

Wear was fumbling at the buckle of the money belt. It's glove leather pouches were well stuffed with greenbacks and fastened with glove snaps.

— TO OUR READERS —

We are constantly experimenting in an effort to give you the very best reading surface obtainable. For this reason, there may be occasional slight fluctuations in the thickness of this magazine. Now, as in the past, every magazine bearing the Popular Publications seal of quality will continue to have the same number of pages, the same wordage, the same unparalleled value in top-flight reading entertainment that has been and will continue to be our Popular Fiction Group guarantee—the best reading value obtainable anywhere at any price!

Rudell and Tanner, guns in hand, were enjoying the situation.

Tanner prodded Wear in the back with his six-shooter. "You'll sink or you'll learn to swim, Sheriff. I'm takin' you up on the high bank where the water's deep and black and we're shovin' you in."

Hidden in the shadow stood Pat Conley, a six-shooter in his hand.

Also hidden in the darkness were the river 'breeds, not a man moving. Then out of the night came the sound of a laugh —the short laugh of the Badlands Kid. No man on earth could laugh like that. The result was startling.

TEXAS TANNER whirled. He let out a rasping noise. The six-shooter he'd used to prod Wear in the back shook and trembled, barrel pointed down. His left hand went to the rabbit's foot that hung around his neck by a dirty buckskin string.

Rudell, who believed in neither God nor Lucifer, turned and dropped into a crouch. He knew the Badlands Kid was very much alive out there in the black night, burning with the lust to kill. And he would kill. Pat Conley had played his joker.

Of the three men, Wear was the only one who felt relief. It was a relief. It was a reprieve from the watery grave. He took his measure of courage from it.

"Gawdamighty!" ripped from Wear's throat. His hands came away from the money belt. And before his shirt tail dropped, the sheriff had clawed his gun from its holster.

"Now top Bucky Wear's damned lie, Pete Thrash!" There was no chuckle in Conley's voice. "With the facts of the case. Tell us how he killed the Kid while I keep them two deputy snakes off your back."

"There ain't much to tell of it, Pat," Thrash called. "That sheriff wasn't shootin' to miss. His first bullet hit the saddle-horn and where the dally rope winds cut through the leather it's a steel horn, and the bullet hit it and glanced off and down into the saddle muscle of my leg.

"I went over into the water and his second shot cut the seat of my pants. I knowed I hadn't a fightin' chance. I was lucky to fill my lungs with air and I kept sunk and held my wind and swum under water like a muskrat swimmin' down-stream. I held my wind till my lungs was fit to bust and when I come up fer air I was rolled on my back and only my face come up and only my mouth and nose showed. I musta bin two hundred yards down-stream when I come up for air.

"I grabbed the air fast and sunk deep and I was good for another two hundred yards. You couldn't have sighted me from the bank with the sun shinin' on the water, even if you was a river rat, used to sightin' acrost the water. I was getting numb and I crawled into the branches of a big cottonwood floatin' down-stream.

"I had my landin' figgered out. The ice water clogged the blood flow from my two bullet rips and I tore my shirt to strips and tied it acrost to stop the blood. I landed on the island miles below Horse-thief Crossin'. The island in the middle of the river opposite the Jackson Jones place. I was half froze and didn't dast light a fire. I like to froze to death that night. And next day when the sun come out it warmed me some but I had the chills and fever. I had to wait until the sheriff and his deputies, who taken the news of my killin' to Travis, had cleared out.

"You thought you'd killed the Badlands Kid, you big bushwhackin' son-of-a-snake. But there was one person who wouldn't let herself believe it, fer all them two eye witnesses. When you'd gone, Travis came down to the river bank. She used our own private signal that told me the coast was clear. And I let her know I was alive on the island. And she come acrost in a rowboat.

"When she found me down sick, she went back and fetched her mother over, and a tepee, and what was needed fer grub and medicine. When anybody was down sick or had a knife rip or a bullet in their hide, they always sent fer Jackson Jones' squaw. I went plumb out of my head and was rappin' at the pearly gates fer the loan of a harp. When I come alive I was all hide and bones but I was alive, misters. But nobody but Travis and her Assiniboine mother knowed it. And the one man I knowed I could trust, Pat Conley. And I turned over the job to Pat.

"I'd talked it over last fall with Bill Travis. About pullin' out of the Bad-

lands gang. When I went into the badlands to winter, I was no longer a part of the gang. At any of the jobs while I was with them outlaws, I'd never pulled a gun. I always was bushed up a-holdin' the horses fer Bill Travis and the gang while they held up a train or robbed a bank. Bill Travis himself went to the governor and Conley went along with him.

"And we had 'er made that Conley was to go with me when I gave myself up to the governor. I was all set to stand trial and when I'd served out my time, Travis Jones would be waitin' there at the gates of the Deer Lodge prison and we was goin' to be married and settle down. Here at the old Thrash ranch that belonged to my pioneer father right here at Horsethief Crossin'.

"YOU was always makin' an excuse to stop at the Jones place. You had bin pestering' Travis since she was growin' up. You got her father killed, after he'd run you off his ranch, and you swore he was mixed up with a horsethief gang when you three killed him.

"You three was the ones who shoved a bunch of stolen horses into my pasture of a night while I was down the river courtin' Travis. When I showed up you arrested me. You was fixin' to railroad me. Had me locked in jail until Conley made a hundred mile ride to fetch Bill Travis and his boys to bust the jail door and take me along. From then on, there was an outlaw bounty on my hide and I was the notorious Badlands Kid.

"The only way you could ketch me, you three dirty bushwhacker killers, was to use the girl I loved to bait your trap. It was shore smart and foxy, Rudell, the way you baited it. And Buck Wear knowed that nothin' on earth could stop me from goin' to Travis.

"So I tackled the river and you shot me and swore in writin' I was dead. From then on it was Conley who ramrodded the deal. When you come a-courtin' Travis, she played along. Lucky fer you you never laid a hand on her. She had a little .32 pistol she always packed, even to the dances, and it was all she could do to keep from killin' you when you got to droolin' your damned mushy slobber.

"Then a 'breed boy got drowned and you swore it was the dead Badlands Kid. And Pat Conley told Travis to do like you wanted. To swear that it was the Badlands Kid. And then I was dead, accordin' to the law. And you claimed the five thousand dollars on my dead carcass. Pete Thrash, alias the Badlands Kid, is legally dead, accordin' to the law. Did you ever git killed by a ghost, Mister Wear?"

The sheriff and his deputies had guns gripped in their hands. They knew better than to lift voice in the river night. They could expect no mercy from the Kid. Nor from the grizzled cowhand who stood back in the darkness with the Badlands Kid. The three men, whose own talk had condemned them, were standing there, guilty as hell.

Then, together, Pete Thrash and Pat Conley walked into the red glow of the smudge. And for a moment the sheriff and his deputies saw them.

Tall, slim and straight-backed, walking with a slight limp, the Kid halted. His lean face with its high cheekbones planed down to a lean jawbone. Straight coarse black hair showed from beneath his hat. From under heavy straight black brows, deep-set across the high-bridged nose, were a pair of hard gray-blue eyes that were the eyes of his dead father. Like Jackson Jones, Bob Thrash had been a squawman. The Injun showed in Pete. But the eyes were the eyes of a white man.

The Kid's gun roared, fired from no higher than the level of his flank. It's bullet struck Wear in the forehead, smashed on through and tore out the back of his skull. The sheriff's slug plowed into the ground at the Kid's feet.

Grizzled Pat Conley was shooting fast and with a cold-nerved, deadly aim. His first bullet tore through Texas Tanner's ribs and ripped its soft-nosed .45 slug through his killer's heart. His second was a gut shot into Rudell's belly.

The Kid sent his second and third bullets into the neck of the sagging Texas and the heavy slug shattered the rabbit's foot as if it had been a target. He sent a bullet into Rudell's chest as he reeled off balance and Rudell was dead when he sagged to the ground.

Tanner and Rudell had died shooting but their aim had been wild and Conley's

quick-triggered old six-shooter had put bullets into both of them in that short split-second timing that tells the tale in a gun fight.

THE Kid and Conley stood there with their smoking guns until the last echoes died away. The Kid spoke: "I killed the man who murdered the gamest horse that ever packed a cowboy."

Conley walked over to the dead body of Wear. He squatted beside it and unbuckled the money belt and slid it free. He tossed it to the Badlands Kid. "That's yourn," Conley said grimly.

Then he unpinned the sheriff's nickel star. He stood up slowly and pinned it to the pocket of his flannel shirt. Removing his hat, he held it in his left hand.

"I do solemnly swear," Conley spoke in a quiet voice, "as sheriff, to uphold and obey the solemn oath of my office. To see that law and order is enforced and that justice is done." He put on his hat. "I reckon that makes me Sheriff Pat Conley."

From the darkness came a shadowy figure: Travis Jones. Tears misted her eyes. She reached up and her arms went tight around his neck. Conley held her like that while sobs racked her.

"You take this young 'un off my hands, Pete." Conley grinned.

After the wedding of Travis Jones and Pete Thrash, Pat Conley went with them to see the Governor of Montana at Helena. When he had listened to what they had to tell, he sat reared back in his chair. With the filled money belt in his hands. Its glove leather pouches bulging, the snaps fastened. Since Conley had removed the belt from Wear's dead body, the snaps had never been opened.

"The Badlands Kid," said the governor, "is officially dead. Written off dead on the law books. I see no reason why we should awake the dead." His eyes twinkled. He tossed the belt unopened on the desk and nodded to Conley to pick it up. "It might be fair enough to take out five thousand dollars. Leave it here on the desk. I'll see that it is returned to the proper authorities and no questions asked. The Kid is dead."

THE END

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Four Corpses, Headed East

By GEORGE C. APPELL

THE westbound passengers at the Crazy Horn change station stood in a tight group at one end of the platform, upwind from the four canvas sacks containing the four bodies. The night stage, the one the passengers had come to Crazy Horn on, turned north at the change station and trailed on up to Medicine Butte, Standing Rock and the Parson's Nose. The day stage from the east, the one the passengers were waiting for, lined out straight west for Fort Hatchard, following the old Bozeman Trail through Planet Valley, over the Big Horn and so to Virginia City. The wait at Crazy Horn, if you were going west, depended upon the day driver, who might be Tom Renishaw or Shaky Swift or Hard John McCutcheon.

"Prob'bly Shaky," the agent allowed. He'd come out of the station to sniff the dawn air and try to sell coffee or whiskey

The four corpses in canvas sacks waiting at Crazy Horse station would soon have grisly company.... For Shaky Armstrong, Army deserter and stagecoach driver, had turned corpse-maker for his last rogue's ride...

Rossiter smashed Joe Yount's face with a quick shot

to the passengers, and also to test with one boot the rigidity of the bodies. Rigid, they were all right where they were; but once they began to soften he'd have to bury them and not wait for the eastbound stage to come down from the Parson's Nose and pick them up for more proper services in their respective home hamlets.

One had been a large man of considerable weight, but he was wide now, and flattening at the sides; the others were somewhat smaller, and were lean in death as they'd been in life, having sat saddles instead of armchairs, which had been the large man's chief prop.

"Division manager for Russell an' Majors," the agent explained to Sergeant Rossiter.

The sergeant was still on a cane, recuperating from frostbite of the feet, which was the reason he'd been sent back to Omaha for treatment. But now he was returning to Fort Hatchard and duty, cane or no cane, and he was glad of it, after the manner of military men too-long separated from the only home they know.

He poked the cane at the largest sack. "Winterbottom, he'd be."

"He was," the agent corrected, and began eyeing the other passengers.

There was Mrs. Elvira Fusty, traveling out to join her husband, the Reverend Eustace W. Fusty, now preaching the Word to some repentant Arapahoes near Hatchard; there was a drummer of household utensils who expected to make a small fortune in the homestead country, and whose name, as he'd explained with monotonous regularity through the night, was Fortune; there was old Dr. Collier, wearing rusty black broadcloth, who also expected to make a fortune, but caring for the sick instead of the kitchens, as he'd explained with monotonous regularity through the night.

Mrs. Fusty had her back primly toward the sacks, and the agent thought it might be better to explain and apologize, though St. Peter be praised, he'd had nothing to do with it. "Just passin' through, they are," he told her. She turned away, mouth tight, and he walked around her and faced her. "Comes Whiskey Williams down from the Nose, an' they'll be eastbound afore you leave, miss . . . madam."

She sighed, a short intake and outlet of breath that was a summation of her many opinions of men, western men in particular. "Seems terribly heathen, leavin' them poor folks lie there." She clicked the tip of her parasol on the planking.

"Where'll I put 'em?" He'd thought of placing them inside, but the heat from the stove . . .

"Who did it?" Mrs. Fusty demanded. "My husband wrote that this was safe country for decent folks to abide in. Then" —she flashed an eye toward the sacks— "this!"

"The Byers boys, madam. Anyone throws down on the Byers boys, an' he's likely to get stiff from lead poison, right fast. Ol' Mr. Winterbottom come out last week, all safe with a bodyguard of three, an' the boys jumped 'em near Planet Valley, an' here they are. Mr. Winterbottom an' the guards, I mean. Not the Byers boys."

"Soof!" Mrs. Fusty turned away again. "Aren't there any men left? Can't these —these boys, as you call 'em—can't they be arrested and brought to trial?"

DR. COLLIER bowed himself into the conversation, holding one hand to his mouth as he spoke, as if caressing his wind-burned lips. His breath, that morning, would never have advertised his profession honorably with a preacher's wife. Mr. Fortune had had samples of things other than housewares. "The law, ma'am," the doctor was explaining, "is contained in cartridge cases out here, and not, like back east, in law cases." He paused to give her time to appreciate his pun but she only turned further away. "You see, dear lady," he continued, estimating meanwhile that she'd be a profitable source of income, with that runny nose and arthritic twitch and nervous stomach—"you see . . ."

The agent strolled back to the sergeant, glad to be relieved of his duties. "Sarge, we got redeye yonder. Ten cents it'll be to the services." He stuck a cigar in his teeth and bit it. "Good stuff—not mountain likker."

"Too early," Rossiter grunted. It was full day now, and somewhat warmer than the night had been, and his foot was feeling better. "Who'd you say the driver'd be?"

"Driver? Oh—him. Likely to be Shaky. Mr. Fortune! Like some likker bottled for the crowned heads of Europe an' France? Twenty cents, special rate for the trade." He followed Mr. Fortune inside, and Rossiter was left alone between the four bodies, at one end of the platform, and the doctor and Mrs. Fusty, at the other.

The sergeant was staring east, half-alert to the first sign of the stage, half-conscious of the deepening yellow wash of the rising sun. Soon it would pale, its brightness would burn back into the blue of morning, and the sky would be a glaring bowl that would crush them all day.

Shaky . . . Rossiter smiled and rested his bad foot on his good one and trusted his weight to the cane. It had been someone with that name, that nickname, who had caused his woes, and if this driver was that same someone . . . No, things don't happen like that. This palsy-palmed person he'd been searching for would be in Canada now. Or China, for all that. His name was Strong—Shaky Strong. Trooper William E. Strong, late of the guardhouse at Fort Hatchard, and now on the deserters' list. And it had been Rossiter who'd been sent to get him, alive, dead, or luke warm, and who'd gotten blizzarded up by the Powder River and damned near lost a foot as a result. And the hunt was off, after all that trouble. The Army still wanted Trooper Strong, and wanted him very much; but it was no longer interested in using good men and time tracking him down.

Shaky Strong . . . couldn't hold a carbine steady on the range, and the others laughed at him—and maybe Corporal Coles did kick him once—and then Strong had shattered the corporal's jaw, and you don't do that in the Army. Or you're not supposed to.

A cloud of yellow dust came bowling over a rise to eastward, puffed like a pouter pigeon in front and leaving ragged tatters behind. Hoofs were muffled in the distance, dim to the ear; and presently Rossiter saw them plunging ahead of the puff, darting and flashing. And then they were loud, and Mrs. Fusty was *soofing* and the doctor was clearing his throat as he trotted into the station for a quick bite of the bottle. Mr. Fortune came out, stepped gingerly around the bodies and picked up his sample case.

"Madman," Mr. Fortune muttered.

They saw the driver bent double over the box, tight-reining the teams toward a flourish finish at the station, voice slicing above the howl of wheels and drumming of hoofs: "Greasers!"

Two Mexican boys dashed from behind the station with grease pails and brushes; fresh teams were led from the corral, harness sleek.

The stage shrieked up on drying axles and rocked to a side-swaying halt and stood shuddering in the choking backblast of its own dust. The driver set the brake, jumped down and fanned the dust away from his eyes with swinging arms. He groped his way to the platform, drew up sharply at sight of the sacks, then respectfully moved around them.

The agent came out, mouth moving helplessly as he tried to think of a way to speak in Mrs. Fusty's presence without cursing.

The driver peeled off a low-crowned Stetson and bowed with savage mockery. "You wanta know why did I come in fast, instead of walkin' the teams to cool. Well, Mr.—" His smile sank and his eyes narrowed and he straightened suddenly, looking at Sergeant Rossiter.

THE sergeant was smiling again. He leaned off the cane and limped around the bodies and came to the driver. He said, "God must be smart, fixin' it this way. Hullo, Strong."

"Strong?" It was the agent.

"William E.," the sergeant supplied. "A name I'll never forget."

The agent cocked his head left and right, as a rooster inspects a barnyard. "I giss Shaky, here—"

"That's me." The driver rubbed a freckled hand through red hair and stroked a freckled face. His free hand was beginning to tremble. "But I ain't scared." He put on his hat and pretended to watch the fresh teams being hooked in.

The agent asked, "Where's your guard?"

Shaky Strong swung a thumb at the stage. "He was on the baggage rails, on top, till he fell off."

"Till he—" The agent peered closer.

"Why was he on the baggage—oh—oh." He was noticing the white splits in the wood of the stage body for the first time. There were several of them, and one brass clutch-pin on the near rail was broken.

"That's why I didn't slow down," Shaky explained. His hands were vibrating suddenly, and he forced them into his trouser pockets.

The agent said what they all were guessing. "The Byers boys, huh?"

"Yuh, back ten miles. They didn't time it right an' we were through Hat Pass before they jumped."

"No passengers?"

"None." He eyed the sacks. "I see Whiskey Williams has a load for the east."

The agent wiped his mouth with a bony wrist. "Winterbottom an' his honor guard. Happened near Planet Valley yestiddy. Out inspectin' fer bandits."

Everyone looked at everyone else strangely; no one wanted to utter the obvious: "And found them;" and Dr. Collier left them and stepped into the stage after Mrs. Fusty. They sat on the rear seat, and Mr. Fortune climbed in and sat on the front seat, facing the other two, and braced his sample case across his knees.

Rossiter saw him waiting, and waved. "Put your gear next to you, Fortune." He jerked his head at Shaky. "I'm ridin' on the box . . . sort of a guard." Then he addressed the driver: "This is convenient. I can watch you all the way to Hatchard, where the company can hire a new driver."

Mr. Fortune put his case on the seat next to him, then threw a leg over the haspings, just in case he should doze off, and the doctor should reach for more samples, as he'd done the night before.

"I don't wish to be rude," the agent was intoning, "but if I could sort of know a hint about why Shaky Swift all-of-a-quick becomes a hangdog—"

Strong looked up and the light was low in his eyes. "I got caught up with." His hand was out, still trembling. "S'long, mister. Send what pay's due me to the guardhouse at Hatchard, care of Private Strong." They shook, and again that morning words failed the agent.

Rossiter climbed clumsily up to the box. Shaky sprang after him, and the greasers dropped off the rails where they'd lashed baggage. An imperious rapping sounded on the roof and Rossiter leaned far over and found himself almost face-to-face with Mrs. Elvira Fusty. She stopped rapping with her parasol and stabbed a finger at the split wood. "What's that?"

"That?" Rossiter took a breath and told her. "The Byers boys tried to stick up the stage, ma'am. But that was ten miles back. All clear now for the fort."

"Well! I declar'—an' you in the Army. Don't they have soldiers out here?"

Rossiter winked at her, something no man had done in years. "There're two on the box right now, ma'am. And if you'll kindly withdraw your head—?"

Shaky let off the brake and rattled reins and the new teams leaned into the traces

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and picked up a trot and, a moment afterward, were galloping west along the Bozeman trace for Fort Hatchard and, ultimately, Virginia City, though another driver would be at the reins by then.

And just to insure that fact, Rossiter drew his hand gun and laid it over his lap, muzzle held on the driver's ribs, and about eighteen inches from them.

THE driver rattled the ribbons again and bunched the loops and lashed mightily with the whip until the three teams were plunging evenly, hames taut, and the near prairie was a rushing brown blur.

Only then did he speak. "Sarge, you oughtn't to lie to a lady. Those boys won't stay behind us for long—not with U. S. mail in the boot."

Rossiter braced tightly on the boxrails as the stage turned with the trail, then relaxed on the straightaway ahead. "Thought they'd stay near Hat Pass."

"With a buzzard-picked corpse waitin' to be picked up?" He slashed the wind with his whip. "By God, that's five dead men that Whiskey's got to tote. An' there were five on the stickup, which makes it even. Lonnie an' Frank Byers—I saw them. An' Joe Yount an' two half-breeds—giddap! hup-ho!" They rolled west through the hot dust of morning, each silent with his thoughts.

Finally Rossiter spoke and as he did he moved the hand gun up and down. "See here, don't try anything." The rumble of wheels and chocking of hoofs were loud, and he repeated it. And added: "Don't even reach for that rifle. You'll never haul it clear of the ring socket!"

Shaky nodded, his sharp-featured, freckled face a mask of penitence. "Winterbottom tried about the same thing, an' see what happened! Thought because he was division manager for a big freight outfit, his bullets had brains!"

"You got the idea, Shaky!" Rossiter lay the gun's muzzle on his thigh, holding it steady against the shake and sway of the stage. "Just drive!"

Shaky drove hard, legs straight out on the dash, levering against the weight of the reins. His weather-seared fists were jouncing fitfully, and it occurred to Rossiter that the motion of the stage had little to do with it, that Shaky Strong was nervous again, as he'd been nervous so many times on the range at Fort Hatchard. That rifle in the ring socket would be about as effectual as a walking-stick come trouble.

Rossiter's cane was between his legs, held by his knees; and when the stage slowed near Punished Woman's Creek, then stopped for water, he decided against trying to get down. The deserter might try something during the clumsy, cane-cluttered descent from the box.

Elvira Fusty alighted on Dr. Collier's arm, kerchief held to her mouth; and then Mr. Fortune climbed out and stretched his legs with knee bendings and thigh liftings and twists of his ankles in the damp sand of the creek side.

Mrs. Fusty declared that she'd never had such a fast ride in her life, an opinion to which the doctor subscribed with a bow. "Dear lady, injurious as high speed may be to the human structure, today it is our advantage." He strolled toward Shaky Strong and in a hoarse whisper mentioned the dust paralleling them.

Shaky nodded. "I seen it."

"Indians?" the doctor wanted to know.

Shaky backed the lead team from the creek. "Not now, doc. No longer."

"Who, then?"

Shaky ladled grease from a bucket and slopped it onto the front axle. "You carry a gun, doc?"

"Heavens, no! Might shoot someone."

"Fortune got one?" He stood away from the axle and watched the grease drip into the sand.

Dr. Collier smiled unctiously. "Mr. Fortune carries trade goods but not in lethal form."

Ten minutes later the stage made white water crossing the shallow ford of Punished Woman's Creek and spun west down the Bozeman trace for Planet Valley, after which it would ford the Big Horn and arrive at Fort Hatchard with the twilight.

Sergeant Rossiter was enjoying his vigil on the box. The sandy little man at the reins was patently in a state of nerves, as would be anyone who before nightfall would be spread-eagled on a caisson wheel for sins committed. It had been almost a year before, Rossiter recalled, that Trooper Strong had clouted Corporal

Coles in the sub-maxillary region, then been slung into the guardhouse for it; it had been almost a year before Trooper Strong had busted out and taken to the hills.

"Strong, how come you signed on with the stage?"

Shaky took up rein-slack as they rolled over the last rise before spinning down into the flat, wooded, three-mile bowl of Planet Valley. He half-set the brake in anticipation of the grade ahead.

"Figured that'd be the last place you'd look for me." He spat cross-wind and clucked his tongue to the teams.

"It was." Rossiter steadied the hand gun across his lap, knees stiff to the down-angled trail. "I had one helluva time because of you. Had to hide out against some Arapahoes—they got 'em later, an' they're on the reservation—an' I got caught in a prairie blizzard an' like to damn near lost my foot. All for you. You bum."

SHAKY smiled for the first time since they'd left Crazy Horn station. "You got off easy, Sarge. I had to live off'n the land"—he shoved the brake forward more—"an' couldn't holt a gun straight enough to bring down game. So I tried fishin' in the Powder, an' damn near starved. Then I saw your tracks in the snow an' lit out east for Standin' Rock. The stage people wanted to know why did I shake. I tol' 'em it was because I had a hangover. They hired me on the spot, claimin' that drinkin' men must work hard to get the dollars to drink. An' I been rollin' this hoop ever since, while you were edgin' toward the Yellowstone to bring me back. Hup-ho! Giddyap!"

The grade eased off where the trail flattened and Shaky opened the brake and slapped ribbon and cut air with the whip as they entered the shale-racked bottom of the valley. Jackpine spread on each side of the road, and ahead, half way across, a rocky hill was studded with it.

"You louse," Rossiter growled.

Shaky shrugged. "I never could aim right till I was mad, Sarge. That's how come I busted Coles' eatin' shelf that time. I was burnin' mad."

"You punk." The rattle of the ride had spanked pain through Rossiter's healing foot, and he began to align in his mind the various things he'd do to Trooper Strong once they were on the post. The wheel, of course. Naturally. Half-pint of warm water a day. Crusts from the mess. The rock pile, the manure pile, the log heap, the wood cord, the . . . He drew in a grateful breath and smiled. "You jackal."

Shaky shook rein on the flatland and sent the teams fast past the first of the stands of jackpine. He turned his head once and shouted through the wind: "How far's that spinner of yours shoot?"

"Why? You goin' to run?" Rossiter lifted the pistol an inch from his leg.

"No, but you might have to!" He thrust out an arm. "Look there!"

The shattered wreckage of a rig was strewn alongside the trail—the last conveyance ever used by broad Mr. Winterbottom before Frank Byers had blown the life out of his body.

Mr. Winterbottom had made the final error of not turning out his pockets as requested. He had chosen to reach for a vest-weapon instead, and his bodyguards had followed his lead.

Shaky whipped up the teams on the stretch leading to the rocky hill with its purple-green growth and ragged cutbacks and fissures. He wanted to leave that hill behind and gain the winding road beyond it, the pine-bordered road that circled out of Planet Valley and led to the Big Horn an hour west. Five, they were: Lonnie and Frank Byers, Joe Yount and two half-breeds. And five lay dead to eastward: Winterbottom, his three guards, and the shotgun guard who'd tried to use the baggage rail for an aiming-rest and had been blasted off it and left dead under slate dawn skies. Five and five; there'd have to be a payoff before anybody could ride the country again.

The hill was directly on the right of the speeding stage; in a moment they'd be caroming around the bends of the winding road looping through the pine lands, and fifteen minutes later they'd be in the open country shelving down to the Big Horn. Shaky popped the whip and slung it sideways and thrashed it back and it cracked like shrapnel and the teams strained for speed. "Hup—ho!"

A bullet smacked wood and a woman's

voice bleated *"Soof!"* and Rossiter damned himself and snagged the hand gun around for a target. Two more slugs smashed into the stage and glass broke and Mr. Fortune mouthed unfinished sentences.

Rossiter holstered his pistol, grabbed up the rifle and snapped off a shot rearward; he lowered himself flat, snagged a handrail and re-aimed at the first of the five masked riders who had swung from behind the hill.

Shaky Strong yelled angrily, fury boiling up through him at the nearing spectacle of the killers who feasted on innocent travelers and who now, by plan, were about to snuff out the souls of five more.

The whip exploded and Shaky shrieked at the teams and Rossiter squeezed off one more shot.

The ferrule of a parasol darted from the door. "Young man, this place is full of broken whiskey bottles, and when my hus—"

A bullet rapped the ferrule and the parasol flipped free and was gone in the dust behind. "Soof!"

SHAKY lashed the teams with diabolic rage and the stage rocked sideways as they careened onto the winding road, pivoted around to the other side, then went straight at a racketing gallop. The broken-ice bark of a shot smacked close and Rossiter whirled on the rails and smashed Joe Yount's face apart with a quick shot. Yount threw up his hands, fell backward, bounced twice and vanished in the dust.

Strong offered the wet reins to Rossiter. His thin, freckled face was twisted in pain and his eyes were opening and shutting, opening and shutting.

"Grab on, Sarge! Here's where I leave you!" He pushed the greasy leather coils at the sergeant. "I'm hit in the shin-bone, though thanks for hittin' him back!" Rossiter wrenched an arm through the loops and snaked his legs at the box. Shaky took the rifle from the sergeant and winked. "Roll this ol' hoop till the axles fall off, I'll see what I can do for you, 'cause God knows—I'm mad!"

His hat flapped off and disappeared as he rose, for an instant, to get a one-sided balance on the edge of the box. Then he pushed mightily with his healthy knee and dropped through the dust-screen and struck painfully and came to rest on his stomach in the jack-scrub. The stage boomed around a bend and was out of sight.

He gasped once as pain lanced his leg; he palmed back loose red hair and said nasty things to the blankets of dust, and gripped the rifle hard. Frank Byers came first, riding low on the near-side of his horse's neck, a silver-mounted .44 flanking the animal's tugging bridle.

A great calmness settled through the muscles of Shaky Strong just before he fired.

Frank Byers snapped straight in the saddle and sagged backward on his shoulder blades and slid off and flopped brokenly and skidded to a stop, one leg incongruously bent. He never moved again.

Shaky Strong made a mark in the dirt; a voice like his own voice was saying, "Coles, you should be here now."

Lonnie Byers lay his horse to its haunches in a mountain of smoking dust and cried out; the two half-breeds behind him see-sawed hot reins and side-stepped into a prance and waited fifty yards back.

The voice in Shaky's ear called, "This way, Lonnie. I can't aim at the back of a man's head."

They fired together and Lonnie's brows arced upward in a surprised look.

Shaky fired again, lungs holding an inhale to steady his aim, and Lonnie's brows went down and he hung over his pommel like a spineless puppet, butt high. His horse bucked and bolted and shook its load free and galloped across the scrub, and Lonnie lay still and waxen in the rutted road.

Shaky reloaded; he felt fine, his nerves were like rock and his shin didn't hurt at all. Or he couldn't feel it hurt.

The two half-breeds weren't having any more; they circled off the road and glanced fearfully over their shoulders and felt flanks with frightened spurs.

Shaky hunkered and crawled to the rim of the ruts and shouted the only Spanish phrase he knew, and it was enough to stop them for one second in that reflex action that immobilizes insulted men.

He got the first one clean through the throat, but he had to shoot the second one in the back, as the man had turned

east with spurs stabbing. Shaky watched the two horses race out of Planet Valley with reins streaming; and after a moment the pain quirted his shin and his stomach felt knotted and his hands began to wobble and shake, quiver and shake, wag and shake.

THAT'S the way Sergeant Rossiter found him half an hour later, when with a watchful Mr. Fortune on the box he brought the stage back down the winding trail through the pine lands. The doctor had volunteered to remain with Mrs. Fusty, she being in need of a prescription for fright, frayed nerves and shocked morals.

Rossiter lowered himself from the box, took his cane from Mr. Fortune and had a look at Shaky Strong's shin wound. "Flesh only. Bone's fine." He helped Trooper Strong to his feet. "I'll hack off a sapling for you—you'll need a cane yourself, now."

They took the teams at a walk west out of the valley, and Mr. Fortune shifted around and eyed the road to the rear, with the far form of Joe Yount, the two nearer forms of the half-breeds, and the closest forms of the Byers boys. "Bless my samples, gentlemen," he breathed, "the next stage east'll have five whole bodies to tote."

"Almost whole," Shaky sighed, and grinned at Rossiter. He had a broken parasol.

The sergeant studied the rein-loops in his grimy hands. "Funny thing about military law." He pursed his mouth, not looking up.

"Sometimes, Sarge, I miss the humor of it." Shaky sighed again, the stark vision of a caisson wheel rising in his saddened mind.

"But don't ever miss the point." They were within sight of the doctor and his patient, and Rossiter let the reins lag laxly. "A deserter, now—if a man deserts, and voluntarily returns inside a year, the only thing that happens to him is—he loses his pay. But"—Rossiter looked swiftly at the dusty redhead—"you got pay coming from the stage outfit, haven't you?" He cleared his throat noisily. "Funny, how we met when you were on your way back to Fort Hatchard—oh, I forgot to mention that Coles is in the guardhouse, rank of private. Kicked another recruit, and you know how the Old Man feels about that sort of stuff."

Shaky was trying to control his quivering hands, failed, and sank them deep into his pockets. His shin hurt monstrously, but he wasn't bad anymore.

And when Mrs. Fusty tearfully opened her purse and handed him a bright new half dollar in reward for such services, he withdrew a trembling hand, took the coin and thanked her gravely. She regarded her retrieved parasol.

"Now what, young man, will you do with that? Candy for a girl, perhaps?"

Shaky looked her full in the eye. "Ma'am, I'm goin' to send a dozen roses to the guardhouse at Fort Hatchard, an' if you'd like to come out an' water 'em anytime—I'd be delighted."

"And so would I!" Rossiter blurted, and rolled the hoop west across the open land toward the ford of the Big Horn and Fort Hatchard just beyond. It was coming on twilight, and they might be late for supper.

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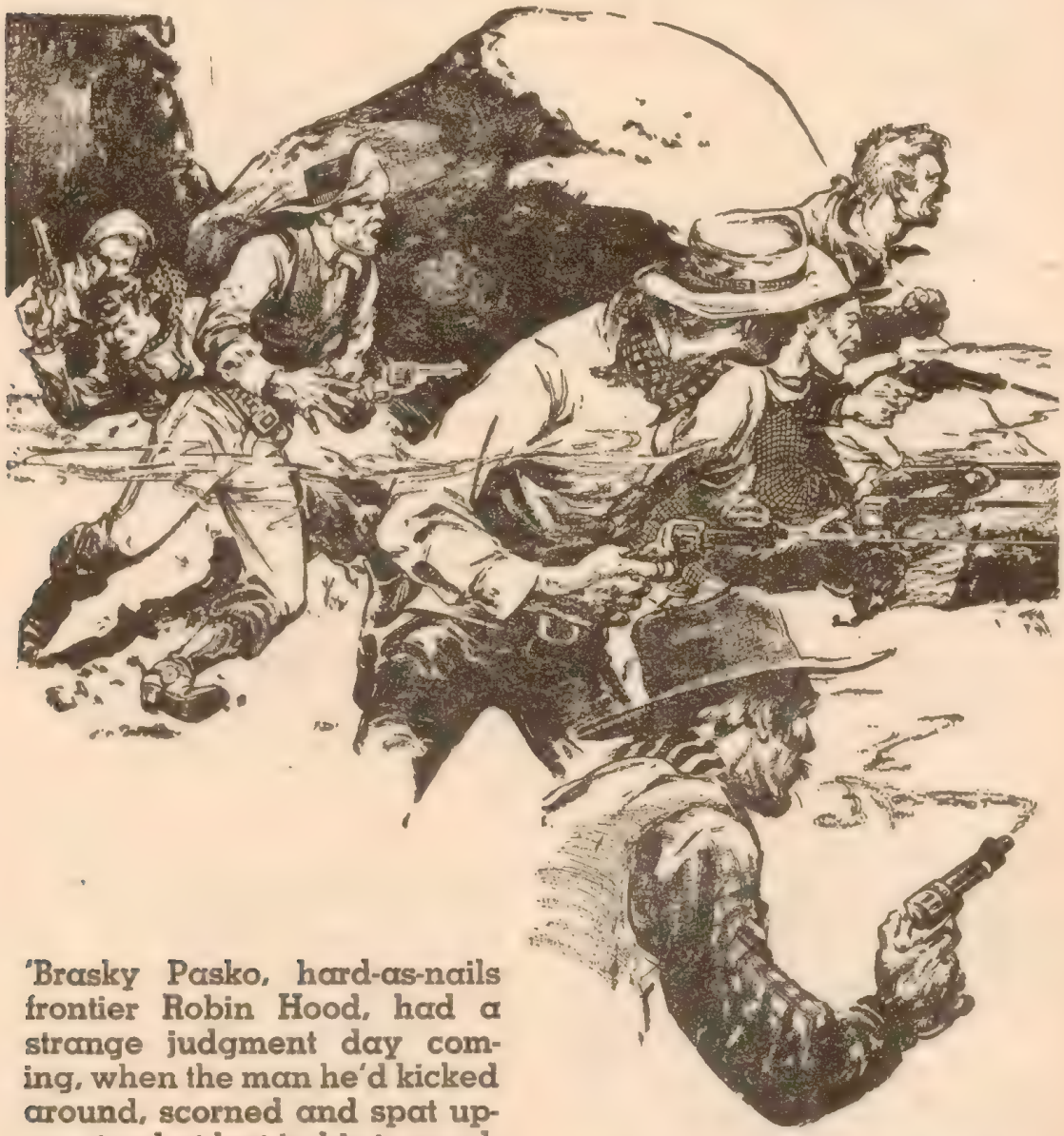

'Brasky Pasko, hard-as-nails frontier Robin Hood, had a strange judgment day coming, when the man he'd kicked around, scorned and spat upon, stood at last in his true colors: The only gunman west of Dodge whose blazing Colts could call down Death even quicker than 'Brasky's own. . . .

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

CHAPTER ONE

To the Victor—

'BRASKY PASCO lowered his long legs from the gallery railing of the Pines Hotel and straightened when he saw Bob Thomas, owner of the Dot 25, ride into town. Behind the smoke veil that rose from his indolently enjoyed cheroot, his eyes were like quicksilver, in their mercurial movement, in the bleach of their color against his dark complexion. While watching Thomas upstreet, he was also keeping check on another man who stood in the open door of the Paisano Bar, diagonally across the street.

Bob Thomas, Pasco decided, was a fool, coming into Los Pinos today. Surely he knew, as did the whole Cerro range, that Pasco's wild bunch had been whoopin' it up here for the past forty-eight hours. They'd just ran their tally on the biggest stock steal in Territory history; they'd made the Lincoln County rustling appear chicken feed. Now they were celebrating a job well done.

It wasn't bravado on Thomas' part. A man who wouldn't fight to hold what he had, even though it was only a haywire outfit, wasn't brave. In the six months that Pasco's wolves had been stripping this region, Thomas hadn't made any re-

He gripped his '73 model single handedly by lever, with finger on trigger

A Hard-Hitting Gunsmoke Saga

By

PAUL L. PEIL

Introducing that boot-tough hombre . . . 'Brasky Pasco

sistance. He'd remained aloof from the Pool ranchers in their last ditch stand. 'Brasky couldn't blame him for that; the Pool was a ragtag bunch of hooligans, yet they had scrapped to the bitter end.

Thomas was simply a bobtail. The nickname given his spread, "The Two-bits," applied also to him as a man. Because he wasn't run-of-the-herd, thus hard to figure out, may have accounted for Pasco's long interest in him.

He'd reined up at the edge of town, where the greasewood trail became the main street. He sat silently in the saddle while 'Brasky watched his head turn slowly, listening to and considering the sounds of merriment from the saloons. Then—and this slightly surprised Pasco—he came on up the drag, a dusty, withal resolute figure on a sweaty horse. Medium of build, smooth-faced, Thomas wore no belt gun, but in his saddle scabbard was a carbine.

Coming abreast the hotel, he touched 'Brasky with a passing glance. It expanded, involuntarily, into a full regard; there was a sustained flicker of expression across his features. Still 'Brasky couldn't read it, for he was observing another bit of by-play.

A drunken Diamond T cowboy had lurched into the rutted street behind Thomas, moving toward him with malicious intent. Now, at a sound from the lounger in the Paisano doorway, he desisted, sullenly turning back to the sidewalk.

In the moment Thomas had passed on. Several doors beyond, at the tie rail before the adobe jail, he dismounted. Seemingly lost in thought, he ducked under the rail and entered the sheriff's office.

And 'Brasky Pasco, thinking cynically, The world's full of weaklings like him, returned his sharp attention to the man in the Paisano doorway. Despite his casual attitude, restlessness was flowing through him with a savage pressure. To himself he muttered, "Damn you, Whang, better make up your mind before I finish this stogy—or I'll do it for you!"

HE HABITUALLY ground the cigar butt beneath a bootheel before rising from his chair, and now, a tall, not unhandsome man of indeterminate age, he viewed his surroundings with a long moment of sardonic, almost amused contempt. The deliberate stride that carried him onto the uneven boardwalk was a grim pattern, deep-woven into his life's fabric. Every motion of his body, the V-tapered torso and the saddle-leaned legs, the cant of his dark head, showed the seasoning of his smoky years.

He saw the startled jerk, then hesitant shrinkage of Whang Hampel's burly form. The Diamond T range boss had been making his challenge all morning; too many eyes were watching from within the Paisano, and from other points as well, for him to back down. He didn't—yet when he finally started forward into the street, he seemed to push himself each step. He wasn't ready, and 'Brasky knew with a surface satisfaction that the edge was his own.

Abruptly a commotion in the sheriff's doorway caught the attention of both men; it became a distraction that lengthened and held.

Bob Thomas was on the sidewalk, in a half-fallen position on a knee. Obviously, Sheriff Brodie had ejected him. Drunk as usual, the fat lawman came waddling after Thomas, intent upon shoving him again. He was saying in a whiskey-thick voice, "Quit pesterin' me, y' idiot, an' git out of town. I won't be responsible for your personal safety—*today.*"

Froggy's feeling his insignificant importance, Pasco thought, watching without taking his main focus from Whang.

Brodie, reaching Thomas again, had hardly touched hand to his shoulder when the latter grasped his leg, pulling himself upward. It almost capsized the paunchy Brodie, and he writhed free, stepping back. His dignity ruffled, he began wagging a finger at the cowman. "Ought to lock y' up, Thomas," he blurted. "Disturbin' th' peace. Might keep you from gittin' y'self killed too."

"Think again, Brodie," Thomas said quickly, "and don't lay another finger on me, either." The quality of his tone—whether scorn, defiance, or some familiar ring—caused 'Brasky to give him a more direct scrutiny. Then he was spoiling the temporary impression by saying, "I—I'm leavin' town."

Brodie repeated, "You're under arrest!"

but kept his distance, looking at Thomas.

For an interval they stood, staring at each other. As young Bob's steady appraisal became a wash of scorn over him, dull-witted Brodie began to squirm.

A frown creased 'Brasky's forehead. This was his first close study of Thomas. In the past months he'd learned all the incidental data of the Two-bits brand: its terrain, how much stock it *had* run, and such. Its owner he knew only by range reports, and an occasional look at the man from a distance. And there was something contradictory about him now, something that didn't jibe.

Not a callow youth, neither was he old with years; he was obviously mature. There was a strain of efficiency about him, at least potential efficiency. It was in his muscle-ridged jawline, his level regard; it belied the droop of his shoulders. It suggested a tide at low ebb.

Calmly now, Thomas turned toward his tethered horse. Behind him, Brodie remained in a quandary, and careful to preserve that condition, he moved with quietest of manner. Only by the flick of his blue eyes did he show that he saw Pasco and Hampel. He was around tie rail and at his stirrup when Hampel broke the tension.

"If the sheriff says you're under arrest, Two-bits man—you are!"

Despite the perceptible tremor passing through his compact frame, like a flip along a rope, Bob Thomas managed an expressionless countenance as he studied Whang.

'BRASKY PASCO likewise was studying Whang Hampel. And the furrow of his brow, etched there by his inability to figure Thomas, vanished. In its stead, down his broad forehead, a vein was throbbing, making a dark track.

For 'Brasky could read Whang like a book, and he knew what was on the next, unturned page. The forecast was in the crafty mold of Whang's face, in the furtive glance he laid on 'Brasky while threatening Thomas. It was so old and dog-eared that 'Brasky instantly lost whatever respect he'd had for the Tremaine foreman.

Thomas, with hand on pommel, was saying, "I'm ridin' out, Hampel. Don't come near this hawss. He's touchy, and kicks like lightnin'."

Other sounds along the street, from the saloons, gradually had been fading until now there was a total stillness.

Whang snarled, "Don't straddle that kak, Two-bits—or I'll shoot you out of it!"

"No, Whang!" Brodie cried, moving forward with great, lumbering steps that shook the plankwalk. "Don't git trigger-jumpy!"

"Stay put, Sheriff," 'Brasky snapped over his shoulder. He faced Hampel, his grayish eyes silver-bright, unwavering. "Whang's not aimin' to plug the li'l muley. He's just scratchin' where it don't itch—meanin' to get in a sidewinder crack at me. Aren't you, Whang? Take your paw off that pistol or play it straight!"

Whang's hand jerked away from his gun butt as though it had burned. He stood unmoving, with a slack mouth and a shuttling gaze.

"C'mon, small change," 'Brasky sneered. "You want to lift my scalp. You been tryin' to buck up your nerve all

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mornin'. You don't like me because I've pushed you around these past months. Made second-stringers out of all you Diamond T monkeys, didn't we? Well, our chore's done, so here's your chance to push me around. All you need is one ca'tridge an' guts. You got th' ca'tridge, Whang; how about th' guts?"

The moment became elastic. Whang's fear was a palpable thing now, like a strong, spreading taint. And when at last, with patience frayed thin, 'Brasky began walking toward him, Whang's feet did a fast backward shuffle that fluffed up the powdery street dust.

Across 'Brasky's features, as he halted, was a look of utter disgust. He said in a flat, intense voice, "Anything I despise, it's the tinhorn breed!" and for a full thirty seconds afterward he cursed the other.

Then turning on heel, he walked off, back toward the hotel.

It was a cue for bedlam.

The goaded, disgraced Hampel, unable to resist the target's temptation, was clawing at his low-hung gun. Thomas, yelling a warning to Pasco, at the same time was jumping his horse into movement, into the gap; he was clinging to the horn with both hands, Pony Express style alongside. Pasco was whirling, his twin cavalry Colts flashing in the sunlight.

The double reports were so close neither was an echo. Hampel had shot wild, being tumbled as he fired by Thomas, who'd come in too quick for him to dodge. 'Brasky had intentionally thrown his slug skyward when the Two-bits animal blocked the opening.

Holstering his southpaw .44, while his long legs scissored like a sandhill crane's, Pasco closed the distance to where Thomas and Whang were struggling. Violently thrusting Bob aside, he seized the Diamond T man with his free hand, yanking him upright, up close against his chest. Hampel, inarticulate sounds issuing from his throat, dropped his weapon; he tried to pull away without fighting.

'Brasky released him. Before he fell back, however, out of striking distance, Pasco's right-hand Colt slashed viciously at his temple, its blued barrel crunching loudly against bone.

Whang sank inertly into the street, the caliche dust billowing up and then settling on his body.

And 'Brasky Pasco, confronting Bob Thomas, asked angrily, "You damned bird-brained fool, why'd you butt in?"

"WHY," stammered the surprised Two-bits man, "he was throwin down on you!"

"*Verdad!* I had to turn my back so he'd do it. But I was watchin' him; had him mirrored"—he indicated the front of the building toward which he'd been walking —"in that window. I had him fitted for a pine box! Now, thanks to your interference, I'll probably have to do it all over."

Thomas gave him a penetrating look. "You mean you think you could 've spun and drawed and beat him? *Uh-uh,* you're not that good!"

His professional pride touched, 'Brasky sneered, "Buckle on a gun an' try me sometime." His metallic gaze was roving over the still subdued vicinity for signs of unfriendly reaction. At length satisfied, he snugged the right-hand Colt into its cut-away, fast-draw holster. Turning to leave, he spoke again to Thomas, in passing. "I owe you no gratitude, my muley friend, but here's some advice. Buyin' into another man's fight is a cinch way to commit suicide."

Blood darkening his face, Thomas rose to the occasion. "True, indeed!" he exclaimed, and nodded. "And I'll always remember the great 'Brasky Pasco counseled me thus!"

The stinging sarcasm pulled 'Brasky around. If it was unexpected, so was the cold hatred he saw etched on young Bob's face. He stood quietly, more wondering than tolerant.

With curled lip, Thomas went on, "This Cerro rustlin' stumped me. I knew Tremaine didn't have the guts, nor Hampel the brains, to ramrod such a big-scale steal. Figgerin' they'd have to ring in somebody to swing it, I guessed it could be anybody from Curly Bill to Billy th' Kid—but not you. Pat y'self on the back, Pasco; you kept us small cowmen chasin' shadows while you put us out of business. Tremaine's th' kingpin at last."

The peak of his violent mood having been reached with Whang, 'Brasky showed a marked restaint. He said patiently, "If

you're through, Two-bits, you'd best climb your pony an' drift, while you can." His eyes were narrowed on something beyond as he added, "Look behind you, an' you'll see Mr. Diamond T, himself, ridin' up."

Thomas turned slowly, to stare; he didn't appear particularly awed. For a jigger without starch, thought 'Brasky oddly, he sure had a stiff back. And then, for the second time, Thomas spoiled the effect.

Brusquely he stepped into leather, swung his horse and went trotting downstreet, in the opposite direction to that of the three approaching riders.

This trio—Tremaine, flanked by his two bodyguards—watched him without altering its paced gait. Obviously the men were keening the strained atmosphere of the scene. The gun pair fell slightly behind, fanning out, as Tremaine reined up near Pasco and stared at the body in the dust.

Around thirty, florid of face, Tremaine had a smug, condescending manner. Something else he had also, which Pasco had perceived: a lack of self-sureness. It was a barrier between them.

"What happened to him, Pasco?"

'Brasky's grin was provocative. "I chawed him up, but couldn't swaller him—had to spit him out."

Tremaine's green-eyed gaze left Whang's body momentarily as he tried to match Pasco's insolent regard.

"How regrettable, Pasco; he'll remember. But—drag him out of my sight, to Doc Sawyer's, anywhere. That blood turns my stomach."

"He's stamped in your iron, Tremaine. Drag him yourself!" The mask, temporarily slipped from 'Brasky's countenance, was on again; less savage with impulse, more intense with contempt. "Save your scary looks for someone else. I've lifted you up to the royal throne, but I still got hands on th' seat of your pants. I can yank you down. Tell your flunkies to look innocent unless they want my boys to work button-holes in their bellies.

Moving over to Tremaine's knee, he reached out, hefting the bulging *alforjas* on the man's expensive saddle, as he said, "Your word's not worth a damn, Tremaine. You were supposed to meet me yesterday."

Despite his visibly controlled wrath, Tremaine replied, "Good Gawd, Pasco. I told you the bank here didn't have that kind of money. I had to go get it. In the meantime, I thought you'd be celebratin'—"

With head cocked sideways, 'Brasky eyed him coldly. "Celebratin'? I am! See, I'm wearin' my fanciest shirt, with th' shield front—my foxed California britches—an' my bench made Justins with jinglebob'd spurs. I been workin' in th' rough for six months, an' this is how I celebrate. Not by gettin' pickled, as maybe you thought—so's your top yahoo, Whang, might pop me off!"

HERE and there about the street, Diamond T rannahans were in evidence, and maybe it was sight of them that encouraged Tremaine. Louder than necessary, he asked, "You threatenin' me, Pasco?"

'Brasky shook his head. "Tellin' you. Climb down, an' we'll go inside th' hotel—you an' me."

Lifting the saddlebags, he slung them over his left shoulder, and turning, walked off. Reluctantly, making the most of his situation, Tremaine dismounted and followed. He was taller and heavier than the rustler boss; carried himself importantly. But whereas 'Brasky's jaunty stride bespoke a brimming confidence, his was a swagger to cover his unsureness.

Upon entering the hotel lobby, Pasco reversed the procedure, to follow Tremaine; upstairs, down a hall and into his room. Motioning the other to sit on the bed, he drew the only chair up to a rickety writing table. As he began emptying the contents of the bags, Tremaine spoke.

"All hard coin, no greenbacks. You sure made me ride some to corral that kind of stuff."

"I put my trust in jinglin' money, not paper."

There was a long interval now, neither speaking. The soft *clink-clink* filled the room; sunlight from the front windows glittered over the mounting stacks under Pasco's tapering fingers. As he watched, Tremaine's green eyes glittered also. He said, "You're a sadistic man, Pasco."

"I'm a self-sufficient man."

"That's the difference between you and

me. I do nothing that I can hire someone else to do for me."

'Brasky merely grunted, counting on.

Tremaine pursued, "I'll let you change your mind and accept my original offer—a fifty-fifty partnership in the Diamond T."

"Nope, I prefer my cash deal."

"Why?" Tremaine sat stiffly on the bed's edge. "A half interest would be worth ten times that payoff."

'Brasky stopped counting. "Not satisfied, Tremaine? Hate to part with this filthy lucre? You wanted a range stripped down to th' grass roots; I named my price. If it was high, it's because I'm a quality man. An' I delivered the goods. Aren't you top tom-cat of th' Territory now?"

"Yes. I just don't understand you. Here's a golden opportunity—"

"You need me bad, don't you?" He laughed. "You know your kingdom may totter when I ride on with my boys. They're hand-picked, craftsmen, everyone; we did in six months what your tinhorn, Arbuckle crew couldn't do in two years. Those coyotes will turn on you an' pick you down to bones."

Tremaine snapped to his feet, his face livid with anger. "Let me handle that event."

"Ai, por segur'!" cried 'Brasky, enjoying the moment. "I'm for you a hundred per cent; always like to see a gent do whatever he's big enough to do." His voice changed abruptly, crackling and contemptuous. "You can go any time now—an' close th' door easy. I don't want this stacked stuff spilled."

For perhaps half an hour after Tremaine stalked from the room, Pasco sat slumped in the chair. His gray stare was on the shining columns before him, but he was seeing highlights of that half a year behind him.

It had been an old routine, with little to set it apart from countless other jobs. With each, he acquired a bit more finesse, lost a bit of zest. The characters had acted true to type, blustering, courageous, game or cowardly. The action itself merely had been transplanted from his past. If it had the power to exhilarate him, lift him up, it could also let him down, as now, making him feel aged and worn. The rut of his years was grooved deep.

He thought absently of the younger Bob Thomas, and familiar little details that somehow wouldn't quite click in his memory. The cast of Bob's features, his shudder under stress. He remembered that both Thomas and his mount had shown signs of hard riding; and there had been stains—manzanita, maybe—mingled with their dust and grime. Maybe. . . .

HE CAME DOWN, in the early afternoon, wearing a slouch hat, scuffed boots and puncher garb. Leaning against a gallery post, he rolled a brown quirly while studying the aspects of this squalid town nestled in the piñon hills. Like some flea-bitten kit-fox, having yapped out exuberance, it now drowsed in the platinum sunglare.

Pacing the street's length to the corral, he saw neither man nor animal of the Diamond T brand.

His horse, a big-chested smoky buckskin, nickered and pawed with alternate forefeet as 'Brasky cinched on his plain Texas saddle. After two days of grain-fed luxury, it seemed anxious to travel. He adjusted *alforjas,* hung bullhide chaps from the nubbin, toed up into the seat and led out. He might have been, from the appearance he presented, a common, grub-lining cowboy—save for his hand-stitched, double-looped busky belt with the twin, heavy Cavalry .44s.

His crew, already paid off, waited in the wagon yard. Ten strong, studiously sobered—though not without suggestion of their belated frolic—they too displayed an eagerness as they swung into saddles.

Passing the sheriff's office, Pasco drew rein thoughtfully. "Get a last drink," he told the boys. "An' charge it to Tremaine."

Brodie was in, his huge bulk overflowing a swivel chair beside his desk. The way he sagged in it, with head on chest, Pasco at first thought him asleep. Then the lawman raised his eyes, breaking his meditation to say, "Rest y'self, 'Brasky."

Rarely expansive, Pasco had a moment now. He said, "About Whang, Sheriff—I saw no reason for you to get involved, when he was spoilin' for me. You have to live with him an' Diamond T after I ride on."

"I savvied, 'Brasky."

"An' it was a pleasure workin' in your bailiwick, Brodie." His grin was crooked. "I might say you're my kind of peace officer."

Into Brodie's eyes, so bloodshot without appearing bleary, came a flash of defiance. "Don't ridicule me, Pasco! I'm rotten—a Tremaine hired man. Just a hay-hand he hung a tin badge on. Any lawman worthy of the name would 've kept you long-loopers rollin' your dirty tails."

Pasco frowned in the awkward pause that followed; gave the man a sort of reappraisal. Brodie continued in a weary voice, "From the many things I'd heard about you, 'Brasky, I expected you to churn this range into a bloody war, like Lincoln County. You didn't— an' I know you tried to check-rein Diamond T's shootin' an' gun-sprees. So, with what li'l self-respect I do have, I'll say thanks."

'Brasky fidgeted, and asked the question that had drawn him inside. "Why'd that dummy, Thomas, come callin' at such a time, Sheriff?"

"He didn't know your outfit had taken over the town. Said he'd been trackin' th' last five days—trackin' them cows of that wind-up raid you pulled last week. Had a brainstorm about them bein' shoved south, around Manzanita Canyon. Wanted me to deputize a Pool posse an' ride down for a gander." He averted his glance. "I've never criticized him because he kept his nose out of other people's business. But when *he* calls me a short-card—well, at least I ain't too yellow to pack a gun!"

'BRASKY NODDED absently. Apparently Tremaine didn't take Brodie into close confidence. For those cows—unlike the previous stuff which had been drained into mining camps, army posts and reservations—were down in the Manzanitas, waiting to be brand doctored by Diamond T, and then run back.

Impatience pricking him now, 'Brasky extended a palm. Brodie gripped it with surprising firmness; still introspective, he said nothing until 'Brasky was almost gone through the door.

"Funny, 'Brasky, how I often wonder what the Cerro might have been like, settlin' up with folks, an' growin'. Mebbe I could've been a proud, pure quill starpacker if I hadn't tied to Tremaine."

Pasco, halted without turning, had a groping silence. He finally said, "A man who knows his shortcomin's is never licked, Sheriff," and stepped outside. To himself he mumbled, "Or so they tell me."

He'd had his brown mood this day, and craved no more. He wanted only to ride away.

As he hit saddle, whirling his *bayo coyote* into the middle of the street, his leather-lunged Ogallala whoop—signatured by his well-known *" 'Braaaskii!"*—echoed from the false fronts. By the time his companions erupted from the Paisano, he was at the town's edge, flashing out onto the heat-shimmering trail.

They overtook him a mile beyond, only because he'd pulled down the fast-stepping Smoky gelding. Riding hipped around, a person never relaxed of his innate vigilance, he watched them come galloping up. Now, a prime assortment of hard-bitten fighting men, they struck a long lope

THEY'RE PROMOTING JIM TO THAT JOB I WANTED - THAT'S THE SECOND TIME THEY'VE PASSED ME BY - I OUGHT TO QUIT
JOHN - JOHN - JOHN - CAN'T YOU HEAR? DINNER'S READY! MAYBE THAT'S YOUR TROUBLE AT THE OFFICE
THEN MARY - I FEEL LIKE A NEW MAN WITH THIS PARAVOX HEARING AID
AND I CAN HARDLY TELL YOU'RE WEARING IT
LATER JOHN - WE NEED A NEW ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT AND YOU'RE IT! NICE RAISE IN PAY, TOO
Guaranteed by Good Housekeeping
FREE HOME HEARING TEST!
Maybe a very slight hearing defect is holding you back—like thousands and thousands of others—why not play safe? Act today!
TEST YOUR HEARING IN THE PRIVACY OF YOUR OWN HOME
Send name and address or use this coupon
DO IT NOW! Paravox Research 2107 E. 4th St., Cleveland 15, O.
Please send me WITHOUT OBLIGATION OF ANY KIND your free Home Hearing Test
Name
Address
City State

across the sun-whipped scrub-oak uplands.

Each was feeling a release of nerves, an abandon, and Choctaw Joe gave it a general definition when he remarked, "This is one job I'm glad to be done with. It paid off swell, an' we sure set a mark for the brotherhood to shoot at—but somehow I just didn't git no kick out of it. I felt like I was wearin' filthy clothes thet I wanted to shuck off."

"Me, too," Chip declared. "Ever' time we hit the Pool, I wanted to take two pokes at Diamond T."

"In that case," 'Brasky put in, "you should stick around longer. This Cerro game itself isn't played out; only our hand in it."

"I'm not interested—but what do you mean?"

'Brasky Pasco shrugged. "That Two-bits joker trailed our last run. If the Pool could take that Manzanita herd back—*Es verdad,* we twisted 'em to the ground, an' good; still we didn't tie 'em hard an' fast. Maybe they can kick, or even get up an' do some chargin'."

Choctaw considered this. "With us out of th' game, 'tis possible. Iff'n I wasn't so hungry for thet black-eyed squaw of mine, I'd hang around." He clucked loudly. "For I'd certainly love to see Mr. Big Pants Tremaine smacked square in his seat!"

CHAPTER TWO

Gunman From the Past

IN THE high country, an hour later, they reached the tiny, isolated aspen park which they had used as a base of operations during the past months. It was their own private rendezvous, unknown to Diamond T.

Therefore, with some surprise, 'Brasky stared at the horse ground-reined outside the soddy they had built, and at the man who, squatting idly nearby, now rose as the rustler crowd rode up through the tall bluestem. Although his head did not turn, 'Brasky's gaze swept the surroundings as he told Choctaw, "You-all thin out, check th' brush. If this a trap, it's neat!"

Tightening rein, he sent the gelding at a choppy walk toward the man. If the latter felt the chilling deadliness of 'Brasky's long regard, when he drew up, he denied it by his calm. Letting his glance shuttle over the quartering Pasco riders, aware of their purpose, he said, "You should know my style by now, Pasco. I travel alone."

'Brasky asked coldly, "What are you doin' here, Thomas?"

Thomas gave him a level look. "Want a talk with you. I—" He began to lose control of himself. "Aw, hell, Pasco, you know you cleaned me out in your last raid!"

'Brasky laughed harshly, tossing his head. *"Muy triste;* ver-ry sad! Graded whitefaces, too, weren't they? One of them worth half a dozen of the red longhorns these so-called cowmen around here run." His sigh was mockery. "Yes, the ways of this world are wicked."

Some of his boys were returning, which meant things were safe. He swung from saddle, off-side to Thomas, and lifted stirrup leather to loosen cinch.

Thomas came around, nervously quick. "Pasco," he said vehemently, "those Herefords represented everything in the world I had—three years of my life! They—"

Pasco twisted about, snapping, "I can't help it, Two-bits, if your cows got mixed in with the Pool's! I didn't have time to comb brands."

"Uh-uh! I kept my stuff fenced from th' scrub. You broke into my upper trap and hungry-looped 'em in your big sweep."

'Brasky delayed his answer, studying the smaller man for some key to his incompatible, pleading manner. "Al'right, what if I did?"

"I didn't take sides, Pasco! I never crossed Tremaine, and didn't aid the Pool. I could have, for I spotted this layout several months ago. But I stayed neutral!"

'Brasky said cynically, "You can't stay neutral in this life. You always have to fight—either for or against a thing. Otherwise both sides shove you around. That's a mistake you better remember."

Thomas was growing calmer. "By that, you'd judge a man all good or all bad, white or black? With no shades in between?"

'Brasky shrugged, yet there was an

irritation gritting within him. Leaning against Smoky's rump, he drew the makings from his shirt pocket and began fashioning a cigarette. He said, "Mister, all I know is myself. Whatever I do—an' I may change my mind, if I want to—I do whole hog. No half-way measures for me. An' I certainly don't sabe a hairpin who won't fight for his own. I raided you once before, an' you took it lyin' down."

Thomas nodded dejectedly. His eyes, avoiding the other, clung to Pasco's middle, as if fascinated by the twin Colts. "Yeah—y' see, I figgered it was a token raid; warnin' me to stay in my hole; I didn't figger I'd be wiped out clean!"

"An' I figger," said Pasco, lighting his brownie and flipping the match contemptuously at Thomas, "you just don't like fightin', sonny."

Thomas stiffened. The tremor was running through him; his slitted lids brought out a network of lines around his eyes. He said, almost conversationally in tone, yet each accent explosive with scorn.

"Pasco, I've known some fairly big men—like Masterson, Wyatt Earp, Tiedown Tommy—who thought you were a *muy grande* hombre. Unpredictable and always cuttin' a wide swath, they admitted, but still a friend of th' underdog. They were mistaken. You're a stinkin', gun-egotistical son!"

PASCO stood taut, his face still except for the bluish vein throbbing down his forehead. He had a hand poised at his mouth, two fingers and thumb gripping the cigarette inserted there. As he tried to digest his infuriation, the unconscious pressure of his fingers crushed the brown cylinder. When abruptly he flipped it into the face of Bob Thomas, it came apart in a shower of tobacco and coal-tip.

Thomas ducked instinctively. In sheer reflex he was twisting his body as both his hands went flashing to his hips. Realization struck him then, and slowly he slid his spread fingers away from his bare hips. The guilt of his expression was tinged with defiance.

Covering him with twin .44s, 'Brasky wore a startled, foolish expression. Such reaction had been so unexpected, it caught him short. He'd slapped leather, from trained muscle more than mind, but his timing had been ridiculous, slow as cold molasses.

He snarled, "You talk too damn much not to pack a gun!"

Head tipped down—whether with weary resignation or deliberate restraint, Pasco couldn't decide—Thomas moved to his horse. Grasping some mane, he swung aboard, and sat a long moment studying the tall gunslick.

He said, "I promise you, if ever I strap on a gun, you'll be th' first I try on for size," and rode out across the *vega,* without a glance toward the Pascoites randomly scattered about.

Squinting after him, 'Brasky stood in deep thought, his fingers tapping the butts of his holstered Colts. Thomas was more enigma than before. Somewhere along his backtrail, young though he was, he'd done some dangerous living, handling guns—two guns. And because in his business it was often the incomplete mosaic that spelled disaster, 'Brasky was irked.

He didn't entirely forget it during the next half hour as he and the boys got their personal effects in traveling order. In parts, or together, this outfit had 'worked' all over the west the past four years, from the Powder to the Bravo. Each now would go his separate way, thus confusing their trail out. Later, after a holiday, they'd rejoin for some other chore.

"Which way you headed, Boss?"

"Over th' shinin' mountains. California's southland, I reckon. Give my love to your Laramie dancehall queen, Pete."

"If you meet up with Bill Bonney, tell him that th' job he claimed couldn't be done, we jest went out an' did."

Hulls screwed down, rolls lashed on, they were crossing the meadow when a rider burst from the cherry brush and piñons, heeling his shaggy bay into their midst. At sight of him, Pasco's mouth set in a smirk of aversion. Red-whiskered, unkempt and dirty, this Dakin was a Pool rancher. He was also a frequent, stealthy caller at the rendezvous.

Obviously wrought up, he shouted at 'Brasky with a voice like a pig squeal, "Why'd yuh throw th' hooks into me, Pasco? Where'd yuh run off all my stuff?

I bin tryin' for days to track 'em—"

"Not all your stuff, Dakin." He had a malicious grin, enjoying the man's discomfort. "We left you a bull an' several cows. We couldn't pass your herd by. *Porque,* your Pool neighbors might wonder why, an' think less of you than they do already."

"Thet wasn't th' deal! Yuh wasn't gonna raid me if I worked with yuh undercover, if—"

"Oh, shut up, Dakin! I've had a bellyful of squawkin' today. You came to me an' offered to keep me posted on Pool moves, to decoy them around. I'd've been a fool not to use you. But, son of Judas, I didn't promise you a thing! In my book a sell-out like you don't rate any thirty pieces. Now tuck your tail an' *vamos* before I do pay you off right." He watched the man cringe before his crisp anger, and added a passing thought, "Maybe you can job up with Tremaine. You're two of a kind."

Strictly defensive, Dakin snarled, "Mebbe I can! Mebbe yuh ain't ruined me. Mebbe I got some information he'll trade fer!"

'Brasky Pasco suddenly was tired of it all—the long-riding of endless nights, of men like the Diamond T grass-hog, and Thomas afraid to fight for his own, and this unclean thing before him. Still, by habit, he never overlooked bets. He said, "But, Dakin, I've done told him th' Pool is out of business. They ain't got no cows! He knows he's th' king-bee now."

"Yuh smart alec! Did yuh tell him th' Pool might keep on fightin'; thet they've got Tie-down Tommy, if they can persuade him to take over?" He saw the luminous blaze of 'Brasky's steady stare, and realized he'd probably talked out of turn, perhaps hurting his own future chances. "Well, at least I heerd thet," he amended quickly. "I don't really know, Pasco."

Pasco shrugged. "Tremaine's worry. We've cashed our chips."

Leaving the Pool traitor, they rode through the hills, their long shadows growing fuzzy in the near twilight. 'Brasky was unusually quiet, contemplative until Sandy remarked, "I haven't heard of Tie-down Tommy for four-five years. He was a rip-snorter. Looks like they brought him in a mite late to do much good."

"Why, I gathered that Dakin meant he'd been with the Pool, but keepin' his guns under wraps! *Denada;* it doesn't matter now." They were coming into a main trail. "Here's where I leave you chuckwallas. What say we round-robin at Tucson, a month from today?"

He rode south presently, at a long lope. Gradually his gait became slower. He felt that he had all the pieces to that puzzle, if only he could fit them in place. In his gun-misty past he'd met that once-famous gunman; and yet trying hard now, he couldn't conjure up a remembrance of him. . . .

HE WAS NOT a consciously wicked person, 'Brasky Pasco. He had scruples, of a sort, but which, along with his conscience, he never permitted to hamper his conduct. If he deemed something necessary, he did it without self-censure.

So it was now, as he stood in deep dark beside a window of the Two-bits ranchhouse, peering inside. The animal instincts strong within him, he was acutely aware of the abnormal quiet that lay over the yard, even the acres beyond. The emptiness of the corral in the moonlight was emphasized by the lone cow pony that rubbed itself against a peeled pole.

The window was partially raised, and he could hear the talk of the two persons in the lighted room. He knew—and found it rather hard to credit—they were speaking about him.

". . . never thought he'd stoop so low." It was Bob Thomas, standing in the middle of the room, his gaze downcast. "That's why I went to him, to beg like a dog. But I was wrong! He's as rotten as Tremaine and Brodie."

She sat before the clay fireplace, staring into the flames of a cedar blaze that took the edge off the night's chill air. Despite the huddle of her figure, she had a strong, prideful quality. And there was beauty in the white, pain-haunted face she lifted to the man, saying, "I understand, darling. A lot of idols we worship from afar look different close up."

'Brasky wanted to leave, and couldn't. The salty smell of sagebrush was stifling him; or was it powdersmoke; maybe memory. . . .

Thomas was pacing with short, jerky steps. "Maybe there's a damned thin line between good and bad, hon'—I always thought so; but one Pool man is worth a dozen Pascos. I only regret I couldn't have helped them. Since they learned who I was, well, it's been hell to look 'em in the eye."

He broke off, his glance going apprehensively to her. Rapidly he went over, dropping down on a knee beside her. "I didn't mean to hurt you! I'm sorry, hon'!"

There was a long potent silence, drawing them together, inseparable. She was studying the flames again, and when she spoke she seemed to be describing something she saw there.

"You were just a big, overgrown kid, Tommy. Remember? Not even twenty, yet on your own half those years. You were wild, impulsive, hot-headed. Traipsing all over Kaycee, following men like Pasco and Earp; imitating their every action. And good enough at it to become a full-fledged, pistol-strutting killer—if I had let you! I told you then, Tommy, if you wanted me as much as you claimed, you'd hang up your guns and live my way. A peaceful way."

Turning her head toward him, their faces almost touched. 'Brasky had to strain to catch her words as she continued, "You have done that for three years. I'm proud of you!"

Thomas kissed her tenderly before he rose. "Then we must leave th' Cerro, hon'—go anywhere. Simply get away from here. I can't stand it longer."

AND now when she rose also, to stand straight before the man, 'Brasky perceived the undelivered burden that she bore. She said, "We decided this would be our home, Tommy. We're staying. Wherever we might go, it would be the same. You'd have to run again, and again, and each time you'd leave a part of you behind. Soon I'd have only a shell to live with. No, dear, beg no more on my account. Do what you think best. I release you from your promise."

'Brasky leaned against the house, needing a support while his vagrant memory, his hunches, all jumbled up with his reality. That Two-bits was Tie-down Tommy came as no distinct surprise. In truth he felt glad, and relieved. For he'd hit the Pool a mighty lick—but certainly with Tommy out of bondage at last, ready to take over, they could hold their own with Tremaine now.

He listened to Tommy exclaiming, "Th' Pool will likely be meetin' at Tobe's tonight. They don't know I located that Manzanita herd. Honey, with Pasco's gun wolves gone, we can whittle Diamond T down to our size! First, we'll recover those cows an' put ourselves back in business. Then—"

'Brasky had heard enough. As he went sliding out toward his stashed buckskin, he was positive of one fact: this was poison range for Nebraska Pasco. Stacking up against Tie-down Tommy didn't enter into it. For a gun-thrower without self-confidence didn't last long.

Neither did a fool . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Death Backs Diamond T

THE Pool cowmen, led by Tie-down Tommy, had committed two grave errors; and now they were trapped in a pocket of their own making.

True, they were tired from a grueling night ride when they came, in the oozy gloom of pre-dawn, to the long bottleneck arroyo that emptied into Manzanita Canyon. But they should have known to infiltrate, instead of entering in a body. And then, when the rifles began spitting at them from along the sandstone ledges, they should have turned and fought back toward the open *cholla* hills, instead of allowing themselves to be driven into the canyon.

However Diamond T hadn't shone too brilliant. Outnumbering the Pool nearly two to one, they'd had the busted ranchers ringed in, at their mercy for several hours, without following through. Of course it meant exposing themselves, and they weren't the exposing kind. This Mex stand-off suited them until someone could devise a positive method of dislodging that enemy.

And all the while, obscured by 'nita growth and sand-cherry bushes, 'Brasky Pasco lay flattened on a rimrock shelf

and watched the action, or inaction, below him. He lay so still little whiptail lizards darted around him unafraid. He'd been there since before daybreak, and just why he remained now, he couldn't explain to himself.

For, if those two factions below him had made mistakes, he was making a bigger one. He cared nothing for either of them; he should be riding far-off, forgetting this. But he'd witnessed the Pool's single, abortive attempt to break out, around sun-up, and the thought he'd had then kept recurring to him: Tie-down Tommy's guns are rusty!

* * *

'Brasky reached for the carbine beside him, levered in a cartridge. While waiting now, he again watched Tremaine and Hampel. The latter, his head white-bandaged, was bossing the Diamond T. Tremaine, whose unsureness had long since evaporated all his swagger, was merely present, a fifth wheel along for the ride.

Lazily, 'Brasky raised on his elbows, sighting the Winchester. The two yahoos who had been snaking their way slowly upward, over rock outcroppings and wind-carved ledges, were settling into perches, still unseen by Tommy's crowd. One had his rifle down-slanted toward the nest of boulders which sheltered the Pool.

Pasco fired—twice at him, once at the other man, who came pinwheeling out through space. Then for good measure he indiscriminately emptied the .44-40 into the Tremaine ground ranks. They were a surprised, panic-stricken bunch down there, as he went rolling from his spot, springing to his feet. Gun thunder rocked the canyon—the echoes of his own drowned out as Diamond T began blasting the edge of the shelf where he'd lain.

Cat-footed, ready to jump in any direction, he ran swiftly over a preconceived course, threading in and out of the rock-and-brush jumble; finally in plain view down a slant which abruptly tabled off above the trapped Pool bunch. Hitting this with an unexpected momentum, he went hurtling over its ten foot drop-off. A long-stemmed *ocotillo*, clipped by bullets, fell in his wake, its flame-colored cluster flashing in the bright sunlight.

In a shower of dirt, he landed on his posterior in the midst of the gawping cowmen. Nonchalantly, yet *very* carefully holding his carbine, he erected himself and leaned against a protective slab, a tall man whose crooked grin drew deep crow's-feet into the corners of his eyes—as he stared with metallic steadiness at Tie-down Tommy confronting him.

He said, "Hello, Two-bits," and ignored the whine of a slug inches above his hatless head.

As his perplexity died out, Tommy was stiffening. "Wrong, mister! It's Tie-down Tommy—with a gun in each hand!"

'Brasky nodded, grinning broader, as if it were a huge joke. "Yeah, I know, an' you sure fooled me! The Tommy I remember was a toothy kid with long yaller hair, sideburns an' a ferocious mustache that pointed up—or was it down, Tommy?"

The tightening, ominously silent group around him suddenly broke as Diamond T opened up a furious shelling. With bullets dropping around them, screaming off rocks, the racket smashing at their eardrums, these two stood virtually unmindful of it: Pasco, the gunhawk who'd mercilessly broken the back of these little people, who'd pushed them after a fashion into this deadly climax—and Tommy, who could lift either thumb from a Colt hammer now and wipe out some part of that score.

The fury around Tommy was small compared to that raging in his brain. 'Brasky read it stark naked in his writhing features, and he had the black thought, like a stoppage of time, that maybe he'd gambled on impulse once too often; that maybe he'd delivered himself to his own fate . . .

THEN, like the sounds around him, Tommy's emotions were quieting. "Those Hickok handlebars," he told Pasco, "drooped. Took me three months to sprout 'em, and then they were so pale I had to dye 'em."

Some of the men, in this lull, were returning. Frankly puzzled by the grinning amity between 'Brasky and Tommy, one exclaimed,

"What is this, Thomas! Ain't this the

Pasco Hombre who done stole us clean?"

'Brasky answered, "In person. An' if you crave to put a slug in my belly, save it. You'll need it fightin' out of here." Listening to a fresh burst of shots, he added drily, "I'd kill you anyway."

"You crazy, Thomas? *Drop him!* Why'd he flop in here, if it wasn't to trick us out into the open!"

'Brasky took a long, patient breath as Tommy said, "Take it easy, Mark. We need every gun we can get; Pasco's fightin' with us."

"Is that so! Why? Tell me why!"

'Brasky sighed. How could he, a being whose very breath of life was excitement, with fighting in his blood, explain his indefinable motives to a plodding, static, unimaginative creature?

He said simply, "That other was a job of work, for pay. This I do for pleasure!"

Mark grunted—because a caroming slug had suddenly torn through his skull—and sagged to the ground. Everyone else was likewise dropping, as the air became a whistling cacophony of lead that splattered the standstone. Diamond T was shooting wild, 'bending' their bullets on anything available. Damage, in whatever manner done, was acceptable to them.

The Pool attempted no return fire, and presently the barrage dwindled out. Sprawled along the base of the frontal boulders, 'Brasky told Tommy, "We got to make a break. Next thing, they'll climb that shelf-rock an' start pickin' us off."

"Bust out?" asked a cowman. "That's worse than stickin' here! We lost our hawsses—"

"Worry about broncs when we need 'em. We're bunched here like ducks on a pond. When we burn up our shells, they'll drive us out. Hell, I know those barroom bravos, an' they can't stomach stand-up fightin'."

"But they'll tally plenty of us!"

"Plenty?" snapped 'Brasky, exasperated. "Some, yes. But not all—which it will be if we stay here."

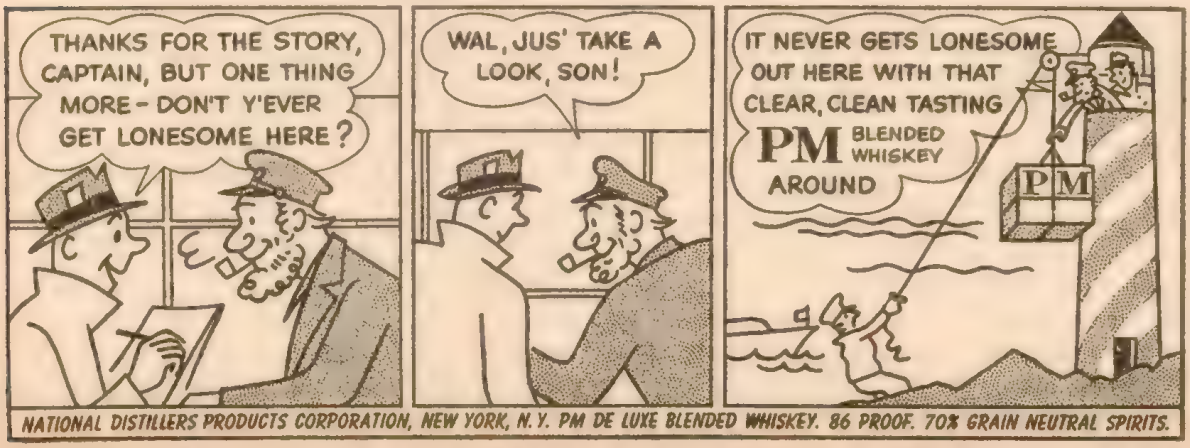
Another rancher spoke up. "I'm with you, if you'll lead out."

The last could have been a challenge, or complete confidence; Pasco didn't reflect upon it. Appraising those haggard, desperate-eyed men hunkered around—and 'Brasky was never tolerant toward inferiority—he felt oddly satisfied with them. He said, "I'll lead out, al'right. Tremaine may think he has this all cinched up, but if you'll do as I say we'll cut his buckin' strap." He grinned. "An' by the Holy Souls, you can sure tell your offspring you once *fought* with 'Brasky Pasco."

LIKE a jack-in-a-box, his Sioux yell splitting the air, 'Brasky popped out of the boulders, a bold, briefly defiant figure. The Diamond T crew, banking on numerical strength, were not too well concealed; and in their long moment of shock he saw several scudding for cover. His carbine chattered, the reports bouncing from canyon wall to wall.

He was running, not fast but surefooted, toward a mesquite-lined draw a hundred yards away. He gripped his '73 model single-handedly by lever, with finger on trigger; by a smooth upward flip, in a quarter arc, he was automatically cocking it; firing it snap-quick, yet so accurately!

Bullets were geysering caliche dust


THANKS FOR THE STORY, CAPTAIN, BUT ONE THING MORE - DON'T Y'EVER GET LONESOME HERE?
WAL, JUS' TAKE A LOOK, SON!
IT NEVER GETS LONESOME OUT HERE WITH THAT CLEAR, CLEAN TASTING PM BLENDED WHISKEY AROUND
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around him, and he felt the sucking passage through the air of others. His own dinning yell filled his ears—that and the continuous gunroll, increasing in volume until it was like angry surf rumbling. By which he knew the Pool men, after covering his break, were coming out themselves, drawing concentrated fire off him.

Half way to the draw he gained a vantage where he could enfilade the Tremaine crowd; and almost halting now, he emptied the twelve-shot repeater in a rapid blur of action. Then as he resumed his run, a leg went out from under him. He struck ground with a jarring impact, yet rolled, and when he rocked up on his belly, he was still very much in the fight.

Once he tried to rise on the numbed leg; after that he lay there, the Cavalry .44s bucking in his palms, his whooping prolonged as he watched the battle progress, progress exactly as he'd planned it.

The Pool had split in their exodus from the rocks. Tie-down Tommy had led a string in an opposite direction to 'Brasky's. Each swung outward, then circled in on Diamond T in a pincer movement that would either enclose the latter or shove them into the higher roughs, where they would be clay pigeons.

They had chosen to fight; but surprised into defense, they were already becoming demoralized. With Tremaine incapable of leadership, and Hampel in the throes of self-preservation, it was every man for himself.

'Brasky saw the two hardcases rushing him at the same time he heard the running hoofs behind him. He ignored the last, for Whang was one of the pair jumping him. They fired in the same fraction of second—but Whang swayed and tried to place a second shot before he toppled forward, while 'Brasky mechanically point-blanked the remaining man.

Then the horses were upon him—Diamond T saddlers that obviously had been secreted in the 'squites along the draw; for a T hand was hazing them. Oddly, Pasco hated to gun that individual who, so unlike the rest of his ilk, was charging into, not from, that scrap. He fired once before ducking as a hoof came slashing at his head. . . .

He was never out black, just churned about in a gray oblivion. When he finally regained full senses, he was being supported in a sitting position by Tommy, whose excited voice seemed strident in the unnatural quiet.

". . . cleaned 'em up, 'Brasky, and we lost only three men! Some went over the rim, and a few tried to run on those ponies. But"—Tommy's tone dropped to a dismal flatness—"only one made it. Tremaine!"

Pasco cursed. *"How come?"*

"I—don't know. He even passed me, and I couldn't drill him in the back—for I've never seen a more scared man!"

A HORSEMAN came down the arroyo entrance into the canyon; a fat man who sat dejectedly in saddle as he slowly approached them. He led another horse, which bore a lifeless body.

Reining up, he studied the Pool men at solemn length, and they measured him. At last he spoke to Tommy:

"Hampel killed Red Dakin in town last night, because he'd tried to play both sides, an' hadn't told about you sooner. I didn't know Tremaine's plans. I had to cold-trail him; an' he was too fast for me. But believe me or not, I came to help you. I'm sorry I'm late."

"Late?" cried Pasco. "Why, Brodie, you're just in time—to take care of some legal doin's, such as attachin' Diamond T an' seein' that the Pool here gets paid off for their losses." He indicated the corpse. "An' you haven't told us about that."

"Tremaine?" Brodie gave it a name. "I met him bustin' out of the 'royo. Told him he was under arrest. He was plumb loco and' opened fire on me. I had to drop him." His eyes searched the faces of the ring around him, and what he saw straightened him in the saddle. He said humbly, "I'm a grateful man. I'll make you the best sheriff I know how."

"Well spoken, trusty servant!" approved 'Brasky. "Now dismount and' squat beside me. I thought at least you'd be surprised to find me here."

Brodie complied. "Surprised at a *quien sabe hombre* like you?" He shook his head emphatically. "Nobody know what you may do, 'cept stay in the thick of smoke. You're just a glutton for trouble!"

THE END

NICE DAY FOR A HANGIN'!

Little Foot Cooper, land-pore butternut buscadero, must get those smuggled Henry rifles, and be damned to the lieutenant who fiddled for Little Foot's own mule ears — The Rebel's Hangnoose Hoedown!

By EVERETT M. WEBBER

"YOU dig up them guns first thing," Pa told me, "and swap half of them for whiskey—good whiskey! Carpetbag Texas is a terrible place for a man to have to live without whiskey. It's enough to make him lose his religion. Then you swap half the guns that's left for vittles that'll go good with

"All right! You've gone far enough, mister!"

cow meat. Hang onto the last two guns for our use and while the storekeeper is fillin' your order go pick you out a woman. Get one that's not too hefty so's she won't eat an awful lot, but still strong enough to do a day's work."

"We ain't goin' through that again, Pa," I said as I hooked up the mules. "All we got to contend with now is sidewinders and wild hogs and horse thieves and a tornado or blizzard or a bunch of Indians now and then. I ain't aimin' to fetch nary woman. I've seen too many of yours. I like it quiet."

Pa sloshed the keg, acting like he didn't hear me. "Ain't more'n half a gallon in there," he said. "Don't you fool around wastin' a lot of time in town. Get that liquor and them vittles and the woman and kite on back."

"There ain't goin' to be no woman, Pa!" I told him again.

Pa sighed, wiggling his toes there on the banister of the front gallery to scare the flies off them. He ain't called Bigfoot Cooper for nothing.

"Shame on you!" he said. "Here you are, twenty-one year old, six-foot eight with your boots on, an' not caught you nary woman yet. That's a reflection on Cooper blood. Lord God Jehovah, I had four wives at once when I was your age. Blackfoot Injuns. Nice gals. . . . That was 'fore I met your ma. She was a St. Louis woman." He shook his head, wild black hair and beard ruffling in the Comanche wind, eyes dreamy. "Nothin' like a St. Louis woman, son. They're more fun than a tubful of snakes."

I went on hitching up the mules, not saying anything.

"All right," pa yelled, getting mad. "Fetch us a hired girl then, or you'll have to do all the washin' an' cookin' from now on by yourself. I ain't aimin' to turn a hand. A widow woman she'll have to be, too, or folks'll talk. Get a young, pretty one, because you may figger after a few paydays it's cheaper to marry her. I used to allus marry my hired girls. That way they wasn't forever drawin' down wages."

"Sure," I said, "but you allus picked one with a light foot and first thing you knew she'd run off with an Abolitionist or a tin peddler or God knows what. I wouldn't have luck like that—an' there I'd be stuck with her in case I ever met me a St. Louis woman like ma."

Pa raised the keg and sipped out of the bunghole in a delicate way and sighed again. "I knowed how to pick 'em," he agreed. "You hurry back with that whiskey. Get somp'n good but don't go over forty cents a gallon. That's twenty-four dollars a barrel. An' watch out for Duke Balleau. You'll know him by his size and his go-to-hell look and the white scar down his right cheek. He's turned scalawag and he'll shoot you or turn you over to the Feds if he finds out you've dug up them guns without givin' 'em to him."

"Yes, Pa," I said.

"Duke allus shoots a man right 'twixt the eyes," pa added. "Don't make a nice lookin' corpse at all. . . ."

I got in the wagon. "If she's really pretty," pa said, "n' acts light-footed, bring out a license an' maybe I'll marry her myself if a preacher comes along 'fore payday. Money is awful skeerce to be givin' it to hired girls, way these dod-durned carpetbaggers is taxin' us out of all we can borry or steal."

"It ain't stealin'," I said, "when we steal it from carpetbaggers."

Pa shook his head sternly and shooed the flies off his feet again. He's a preacher on Sundays when he isn't in a backslidden condition. Whenever he gets a little liquor in him and turns sentimental it makes his conscience bother him no matter if it is carpetbaggers that we are getting our start of horses and cattle from.

THE guns pa mentioned are a batch of those new-fangled Henry sixteen-shot .44 lever action rifles that you load on Sunday and shoot all week—the first repeater invented. It's a penitentiary offense if the carpetbag law catches an unreconstructed Texan with one because it equalizes him too much with a squad of Feds.

Pa and Duke Balleau, who was his friend in the war days, smuggled a batch of these rifles in from England to be shipped to our troops in Tennessee, only the war ended just then. A crew off a Yankee blockading ship came ashore. Some of them caught Duke, and the rest chased pa and the guns from hell to break-

fast, and when he finally shook 'em he took so much whiskey to strengthen himself that he forgot where he buried the rifles.

Then last night he had a dream and it all came back to him clear and strong where they were, so he woke me up and drew me a map of it. They'd been buried for a year but they were wrapped in canvas, dipped in tallow and coated with tar for hiding in the lowest hold of the smuggling ship, so that was all right. Eight of them, to be sold at fifty dollars apiece, was enough to make a man's head swim. Pa would have gone in and handled the deal himself except that he was afraid he'd get to treating folks to drinks and end up soused and spend it all. Anyway, somebody had to stay and watch the place lest the neighboring carpetbaggers come and run all their stock back home while we were gone. In spite of all my objections pa said since I was the one to be satisfied about the woman I better go.

"Anyway," he had added, "the grapevine has it that Duke is down in this neck of the woods gum-shoein' around, an' if he seen me he'd know me and he might follow me when I dug 'em up. . . . He allus shoots a man right 'twixt the eyes. . . ."

Now pa came out into the yard, the keg under his arm, and yelled after me, "Don't you promise her I'll marry her any more'n jist barely enough to persuade her to come out here. I'll have to look 'er over first. . . ."

It's a four hour drive to Javelina City and when I got there I couldn't have done my trading even if I'd had any money because it turned out we'd lost a day and it was Sunday. Everything was shut up hard and tight for church except three or four saloons and they weren't doing much business because a preacher was spellbinding at the arbor under a clump of live-oaks at the edge of town. The stores and gambling houses and dance halls in general wouldn't open till he was through because the reform element was strong.

They called it Javelina City because that sounded more refined than Cannibal City—the original name being because a blizzard-bound freighter ate his partner here one time and he said before they hung him that the fellow tasted just like javelina hog, which is a pretty strong thing to say about anybody and justifies hanging, even if true.

I pulled up at the meeting and everybody turned to look at me. Then it occurred to me that this would be a good time to dig up those guns while no one was loose to snoop around after me. But before I could back out of the mess of rigs and wagons into which I had got myself, a woman left one of the rear benches and came out and said, "Welcome to the services. It's just time for the altar call."

"Well, ma'am," I said, "I'd sure love to stay but time's awastin' and my pa's a preacher so I don't have to worry about being saved." The sun was in my eyes and the mules were cutting up on account of some horse flies till I couldn't rightly look at her.

"What's your pa being a preacher got to do with it?" she asked. She had an odd, drawly voice different from most Texas women, but I didn't mind listening to it.

"He's goin' to get me in with him," I

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told her. "Which one of those roads leads out to the old Bayou Ranch?"

"The Bayou Ranch?" she repeated—and pretty sharply, it came to me later.

IT WAS just then I finally got a straight look at her—and right then and there I saw she'd pretty well suit pa. She was young and pa is strong on that, and she had a mighty nice bosom, and pa is strong on that, and a nipped-in waist, and he's strong on that. I figured he wouldn't notice the red hair and green eyes if I kept calling attention to the other points.

I could see she was getting her Irish up the way I was looking her over, so I took off my hat real quick and said, "Say, you wouldn't happen to be a widow woman, would you?"

She colored up a little more and stuck her chin out. "What's the matter with bein' a widow woman?" she asked.

"Nothin'," I told her. "I'm for it. We got to have one in case she don't just suit pa enough for him to wed her. Otherwise folks would talk. You'll get your vittles and bed and fifty cents a week."

"I don't know what you're talkin' about," she said, "but I reckon you're either drunk or crazy."

She went back to the arbor. I figured I'd better hang around and find out where she lived in case I had to follow her home and argue because it might be twenty miles from here. So I got down and went in and sat on the last plank bench. The preacher couldn't holler more than about half as loud as pa and my mind sort of wandered back to the young widow, who happened to be on the bench just in front of me.

Then after a little I saw pa had some competition because it was plain she was already being courted by the big, dark-headed fellow next to her. He turned to glower at me with a cold, arrogant, go-to-hell look, and his clawhammer coat bulged where he wore what I figured was a Navy Colt. And then when he turned a little more I saw a white scar on his other cheek and I almost swallowed my tobacco.

I could fair hear pa saying, "That's Duke Balleau, son! He shoots a man right 'twixt the eyes."

I thought, Well, if pa wants Duke Balleau's widow woman he can come get her himself. Pretty soon the meeting was over and she took Balleau's arm and they went out and got on a pair of black and bay high-headed mares and dusted down the street. I didn't see any more likely females so I asked around about the road to the Bayou Ranch and climbed into the wagon and lit a shuck.

Pretty soon I came to two big liveoaks, one on each side of the road, like pa said. I turned left across the green range, headed for the north end of the timber that marked the bayou. I had to drive around it. The old abandoned adobe house was on the other side, and the guns were buried half a mile back of it.

Leaving mules and wagon hidden in the timber, I took my pick and shovel and skulked along through swags and low places where the saw grass and briers weren't too thick. Finally I reached the lone liveoak which was my landmark. There were no longhorns to make being afoot dangerous—nothing but bones where thieves had shot the critters for their hides during the war when the men were all gone.

With my back to the tree I stooped and twisted, peering through the trailing moss to take a sight at the ranchhouse chimney. Then I saw there were two chimneys—and pa evidently hadn't noticed that or had forgotten it. I ws supposed to walk a hundred paces and dig. I decided to try the right hand chimney first.

I counted aloud so I wouldn't lose track as I stumbled and blundered through the saw grass and greenbriers and catclaw. And when I reached ninety-six or maybe it was ninety-seven I stopped short because I could see, like the outline of a grave, a rectangle of grass a greener and richer shade than the rest. A possum hole went down at one end.

Excited, I set to digging in a hurry. It was tough work till I broke the sod out and it was a wonder to me pa would have stuck with it long enough to have buried the guns. The day was muggy and I was panting and blowing after going down about two feet. Just then my pick snagged into something—a piece of cloth. I heaved, and up flew a blanket and a lot of bones and pieces of Yankee uniform—with a hole in the center of the skull's forehead.

I said, "Oh, Lord!" and behind me a woman snapped, "All right! You've gone far enough, mister! Climb out of there and start shoveling that dirt back in."

I knew her voice even as I turned. It was that young widow. She had a big six-shooting pistol with a dragoon barrel. The hammer was back. She was hot and wheezy as if she'd been going the long way around to take me unawares and the gun was jumpy.

"Be careful of that thing, lady," I begged.

"Turn your back this way," she ordered. "I want that pistol."

I EXPECTED Duke Balleau would pop me any moment from the tall grass and I hated to give the gun up but pa always said the way to get along with a woman is to do what she wants you to and since I didn't have much choice I turned around. She got the pistol. If trouble started, I wouldn't have anything but the pick and shovel to hold up my end.

I said, "If this is where you buried your man, I'm awful sorry about diggin' into him. But I never aimed to tell on you—"

"Save your breath for shovelin'," she told me.

I made the dirt go back in as slow as I could but at last it was finished and she said, "March for the house." She waved my gun.

She made me stay far enough ahead that I couldn't do anything. When we got there I saw by the ash hopper and woodpile and such in the yard that folks had been living here for some time. We went on in. She called in a soft but insistent voice, "Duke? I got 'im!"

No answer.

"Guess he's not here yet," she said. "He had to take to cover on the way home from meetin'. Sit down on that stool and don't move."

Peaceable-like, I sat down and whistled to myself like I never had a care in the world but she didn't waver a minute, just sitting across from me with her green eyes burning and her red mouth determined and that pistol cocked. She had an ear cocked, too, for Duke to show up.

I said, "My pa is goin' to be worried about me not gettin' on back with our vittles and whiskey and woman. I'm the only boy he's got."

No answer.

"I don't know whether pa would want to risk you or not," I went on. "He likes a nice bosom but he don't go for green eyes. A green-eyed woman of his'n got mad and shaved off one side of his beard and mustache once while he was sort of asleep. Anyway, if you've done got Duke picked out, I guess that kind of leaves us in the lurch. Not that I mind green eyes but I've just not got no use for any woman."

Still no answer. The gun stayed level, resting across her knee, which was crossed over the other to elevate the muzzle. I said, "Pa likes a pretty ankle, all right," as I looked at hers, "but the main thing is, he wants a light-footed lady that will be runnin' off with another man 'long about the time he gets to hankerin' for a change. If the woman runs off, that gives him Bible grounds to get another one—and he has to have Bible grounds, him being sort of a preacher."

Her chin came out a little more and those eyes sent prickles up and down my back. She was goin' to get mad, and if she started yelling like pa when he's mad I knew the gun would wobble, and then . . . "On the other hand," I went on, "he might not like it, you havin' been wedded to a Yank, even if you are good lookin'—"

"You're not making a thing," she cut in. "You're not sweet-talkin' me or putting me off with soft soap."

"Listen!" I was getting my dander up. "Soon as I don't show up at home, my pa and about a hundred other Knights of Liberty will know where to start lookin' for me. I fit with Kirby Smith, and the boys won't stand fer—"

"That's what they all say."

She glanced out the window again and then she said, "Well, ain't any use us bein' mad if Duke is aiming to be gone all day." She rose and slid the pistol into the drawer where she had put mine and pushed it shut. Her cheeks were a little pale as she came toward me. "Why spend all your time talkin' about the kind of woman your pa likes?"

I jumped up but she said, "Don't you really like women?"

"No," I told her, backing off. "I like peace and quiet! Some day maybe I'll go get me a St. Louis woman if I can find an unreconstructed one. . . ." I was scared Duke Balleau would walk in and here I didn't even have a gun. I talked fast but it didn't do any good.

She backed me into the corner, and her hair tickled my chin, and as she slid her arms around me there was that bosom against the front of my shirt and it made me quiver like fiddle music. And—and then she got me by the ears and pulled my head down and kissed me.

"Could a St. Louis woman beat that?" she asked in that soft, drawly voice of hers.

Fighting her off, thinking to get out, I could just barely draw enough breath into my lungs to say, "Pa wouldn't like it, me akissin' his woman—"

JUST then four or five Yankee soldiers dived in at windows, and shoved through the doors with drawn sabers and pistols. The widow turned around, her back to me, her arms outspread to pen me in the corner. She cried, "Oh, Duke, don't fight them! Don't fight them, Duke! They'll kill you!"

I looked around for him as I shoved past her, snatching at a musket over the door, but I didn't see him anywhere. Soldiers laid into me from all sides and we went down in a heap and one got his arm around my neck from behind and nigh broke it. And that Jezebel stood there yelling, "You-all leave Duke alone! Duke ain't done anything! You can't take him—" And she beat the lieutenant with her fists until they corralled her.

He tried to forget that he was a Yankee and act like a gentleman. Coldly polite, he said, "Madam, you could be put in the penitentiary for resisting the Military Government. You're not doing Duke any good, either."

A handkerchief was jerked into my mouth and tied behind my head so I couldn't talk and my hands were pigged at my back. One soldier smashed the lock of the musket and another grabbed the two pistols from the drawer, and they rushed me out and away. As I looked back, the woman had a hand to her mouth, staring after us. They dragged and shoved and prodded me with their sabers on the double toward the slough which branched off across the country from the bayou. When we got there, another soldier was guarding their horses in the thick timber by the water, cussing and fighting the mosquitoes that swarmed in the shade.

One said, "Do we hang 'im here or take 'im along an' risk the Knights of Liberty grabbin' him away f'm us?"

"Reward's the same, dead or alive," the sergeant put in.

I tried to tell them what a dirty trick that wench had played but all I could do was sort of gobble through the gag.

"You're wasting your breath, Balleau," the lieutenant growled. "Pretend to be a scalawag, will you? And plot to run the army out of Texas, will you?"

Somebody threw a loop of rope around my neck and jerked it tight and heaved the end over a limb. I could see the mosquitoes crawling around my eyes but I didn't feel them.

The lieutenant said, "We'll try to take you in alive if you'll give us the names of ten Knights of Liberty. What about George Carew, for instance?"

Well, George is the Exalted Longhorn of the local Corral, but I didn't give a flicker.

"Do I jog his memory, Lieutenant?" the sergeant asked.

They swung on the rope and jerked me off the ground. I felt my eyes popping out of my head and the blood beat in my neck against the rope. They let me back down just as the world went red-black and as I coughed and gagged the lieutenant said, "What about Bigfoot Cooper? Where's he hidin' out?"

Pa is the Noble and Ineffable Six-Horned Bull of our chapter down home and I started in spite of myself at mention of his name. But they didn't notice because they had drawn their weapons again as two other men rode up through the timber—a captain and a private.

The captain said, "He got away, damn it all," and the lieutenant said, "Did he, sir?" and he waved toward me.

The captain said, "Who the hell is that, Mr. Greenough?"

"Duke Balleau—with my compliments, sir," the lieutenant answered smugly.

"The hell he is!" the captain bawled, and that was the mildest thing he said for two minutes by the sun. "Duke Balleau's no redhead, and he's a handsome man. He's got a scar on his jaw and rides the best damned black mare in this end of Texas. He'll be in No Man's Land up in the Nations if you just stand there." Then, to me: "What you mean, takin' up our time this-away? Pretending to be Duke Balleau so's he can get away, are you? All right, if you want to be Duke Balleau, we'll—"

Just then several people started firing from the brush. The rope, clipped in two, fell down against me and I dropped flat. A horse squealed. The sergeant's pistol flew from a bloody hand. The captain's horse bolted down into the dark water of the slough. His men all grabbed bridles and followed, thinking he was leading a retreat. I jumped up and next I knew there was that girl slashing my hands loose and sticking a pair of brand-new breech-loading Colt pistols in them. I saw she was the several people.

"Run up and down the bank, shootin' from lots of different places," she panted. She levered the Henry she was carrying and poured a slug across the bayou. The black sulphury smoke rolled. I dodged out of it and as a bullet *spanged* into a tree by me I shot a couple of times. As I ran out of that cloud of smoke, I heard the Yank soldiers break and run for it.

I WAS almost able to get my breath again. "Well," I said hoarsely, for my throat still hurt as I took the rope off, "I hope you're satisfied. Pa would sure amissed me if they'd ahung me."

She sat down on a log, white and shaking with buckfever now that the brush was over. After a little she said, "Honest—honest, I thought you were a Yank or I wouldn't've done it, not if they'd hung me, too."

I was plenty mad. "And who told you all at once I wasn't?"

"Well," she said, "I knew no Yank would've kept his mouth shut that way just to help out Duke—"

"They had a handkerchief in it."

"—and—and it wouldn't make a woman feel thataway for a Yank to kiss her—"

"I never kissed you," I told her.

"Looked that-away to me."

I grunted scornful-like. "But you'd be lightfooted enough to suit pa, I reckon, nuzzlin' a stranger like that. Once and for all, what about you and Duke Balleau?"

Just then from toward the house came a black mare and the young widow jumped up and started running that way. It was Duke, all right, now in dirty red shirt and chaps he must've had hidden in the brush, and another of pa's Henry's across his

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knees. I never broke my neck catching up as he jumped down and caught this female in his arms. She hung onto him and I saw it was just too bad for pa.

When I finally come up, not knowing for sure what he might do with the four pistols and Bowie at his belt, he says over her head, "Don't tell me, mister. You're ol' Bigfoot Cooper's boy, ain't you? I knowed your eyes. If you'd had his beard, I'd atumbled to you in church. Where's he at now?"

But he didn't listen as I told him. He was kissing the young widow on top of the head. He said, "Now, now, Judy, I'll just go South a week or so till things cool off. Cooper, see her to town to the preacher's house, will you? An' handle her like eggs. She's all the sister I've got."

"Did you say sister?" I asked.

He broke away from her. Blinking fast she said, "Take care of yourself, Duke. Do you have plenty of money?"

"Plenty." He jumped on the tall horse without touching the stirrup, and glanced at me. "Tell ol' Bigfoot I found them guns of our'n." He raised a hand and galloped away without looking back.

"He'll be all right," I said.

Still blinking, she didn't answer.

"Well," I said, "if pa is bound and determined for us to have a woman underfoot I'd as lief it was you, I reckon, or maybe even liefer, since you kept me from gettin' hung. An' he'll be glad to have his old friend Duke's kinfolks, less'n he just gets mad over Duke stealin' his guns. I don't know what he'll say about me comin' back without that liquor—but I figure if you could let me have two dollars I better get the license because he'll take to you soon as he gets over them cat eyes and red hair. Might take him a week or so to come around to it, but—"

"If your pa sees me," she stated, "he'll see me in town."

"Be all right out there," I told her. "No harm in a widow woman keepin' house for us."

"I'm *not* a widow woman, and I hate you and your pa both. Get!"

"You're— Ain't—ain't that your husband I dug up?"

"How could it be when I never had a husband? That's a carpetbagger who jumped Duke when he was digging up the guns. Go on away!"

And then she turned her back and whipped up her skirts and got a packet of Yankee money from her stocking.

"We got a hundred dollars apiece for the guns we sold," she said. "Half of them were Duke's by rights. That leaves four hundred owed your pa. I've only three hundred left. I'll have to still owe him a hundred."

I didn't think to tell her we only expected fifty apiece. I said, "Well, pa would probably cancel the other hundred if he decided to marry you."

"I wouldn't have your pa if he was the last man alive! Nor you neither!"

"Me?" I said. "Me?" All at once it began coming to me why I hadn't really been wanting to take her out there to pa ever since she kissed me. I said, "Doggies! I hadn't thought of that!"

"Of what?"

"Of how I'm wantin' you for myself! I've allus been hankerin' for a St. Louis woman so strong that I never happened to think till just now that—"

"I *am* a St. Louis woman. Anybody with any gumption could tell that, I guess, by now. Me an' Duke came from St. Louis before the war."

I said, "Listen, we can argue on the way to town. We better hustle and get the license and vittles and three or four barrels of liquor for pa. He can take out that other hundred in home cookin'—if you don't mind him livin' with us."

"Us?"

"Me and you. We're goin' to take you to the preacher's house like Duke said—only when we get there we're goin' to get wedded up."

"After one little ol' time of you kissin' me?" she said. "How could a woman tell by that if she liked you?"

"Pa wouldn't like it, you talkin' to his boy that-away," I said. "The Coopers is proud, high-nosed people." I cleared my throat a time or two. Those green eyes were sending ripples up and down my back again and the red lower lip looked like a ripe berry. I said, "She could at least tell if she wanted to be kissed again."

She raised her brows, thinking that over. "Well," she said, "you could try it."

POPULAR FILMS

A Guide to Good Movie-Going For Fiction Fans

Ted Palmer Picks:

For Comedy-Romance: "Mother Is A Freshman" with Loretta Young, Van Johnson, Rudy Vallee (20th Century-Fox). Technicolor.

Mother (Loretta Young) is a financially embarrassed, young widow who actually does go to college when she discovers that a peculiar scholarship, for which she is eligible, will help keep her sophomore daughter in school. Actually, daughter has stars in her eyes for the dashing young professor (Van Johnson). Endless complications ensue and the widow's legal adviser (Rudy Vallee) and the professor tangle over her affections. Needless to say, all ends well with professor getting Mother, daughter getting handsome football star. Rudy Vallee loses the gal as usual but makes a lot of fun in doing it. *Light and amusing.*

* * *

For A Western: "The Streets of Laredo" with Macdonald Carey, William Holden, William Bendix, Mona Freeman (Paramount). Technicolor.

When three badmen split up and two get into the Texas Rangers by mistake, there's trouble afoot, pard. William Holden and William Bendix are the hombres who turn good and refuse to tip off their former partner, Macdonald Carey, on big jobs. This leads to complications when Holden refuses to bring in Carey—a source of irritation to the Rangers. Bendix, however, goes after him and gets shot for his efforts. Holden, stirred to action, mixes it up and has a showdown. *There's plenty of chase, shooting and Mona Freeman in full color.*

* * *

For Adventure: "Down to the Sea In Ships" with Richard Widmark, Lionel Barrymore, Dean Stockwell (20th Century-Fox).

Although they finally lower the boom on Bering Joy (Lionel Barrymore), the old whaling master, he still has time to indoctrinate his young grandson (Dean Stockwell) into the ways of the sea and whaling. Amid storms and icebergs, the old man tussles with his first mate (Richard Widmark), an 1887 ninety-day wonder. *For those that like some salt—in their pictures and their eyes.*

* * *

For Sports: "Interference" with Victor Mature, Lucille Ball, Lizabeth Scott, Sonny Tufts (RKO).

A high-salaried professional football player, Pete Wilson (Victor Mature) has mingled woes with an expensive wife (Lizabeth Scott) and an unsuspected heart condition. Turning down an offer to coach at his old alma mater, he decides to play in the big game—despite his heart—to win back his wife. A team mate (Sonny Tufts) and the coach's secretary (Lucille Ball) wise him up. Funny, but it works out that the secretary is also in love with Wilson. *Training camp pictures, practice sessions and scenes from actual pro-games gives the picture added interest.*

* * *

For Mystery: "Homicide" with Robert Douglas, Helen Westcott, Robert Alda (Warner Brothers).

A transient worker, looking for a job finds murder and murderers on a citrus ranch in California. After being threatened, he testifies that the ranch owner's death was accidental. His isn't, a few hours later, and Lieutenant Landers (Robert Douglas) has a hunch and some clues that lead him to an out-of-town hotel. Questioning the bartender (Robert Alda) the hat-check girl (Helen Westcott), he gets a lead and returns to the citrus ranch where he finds a piece of telephone cable wound up on the plow of the tractor. This is the tip-off on an illegal racing wire service scheme. *The sleuthing is better than average.*

* * *

For Drama: "Knock On Any Door" with Humphrey Bogart and John Derek (Columbia).

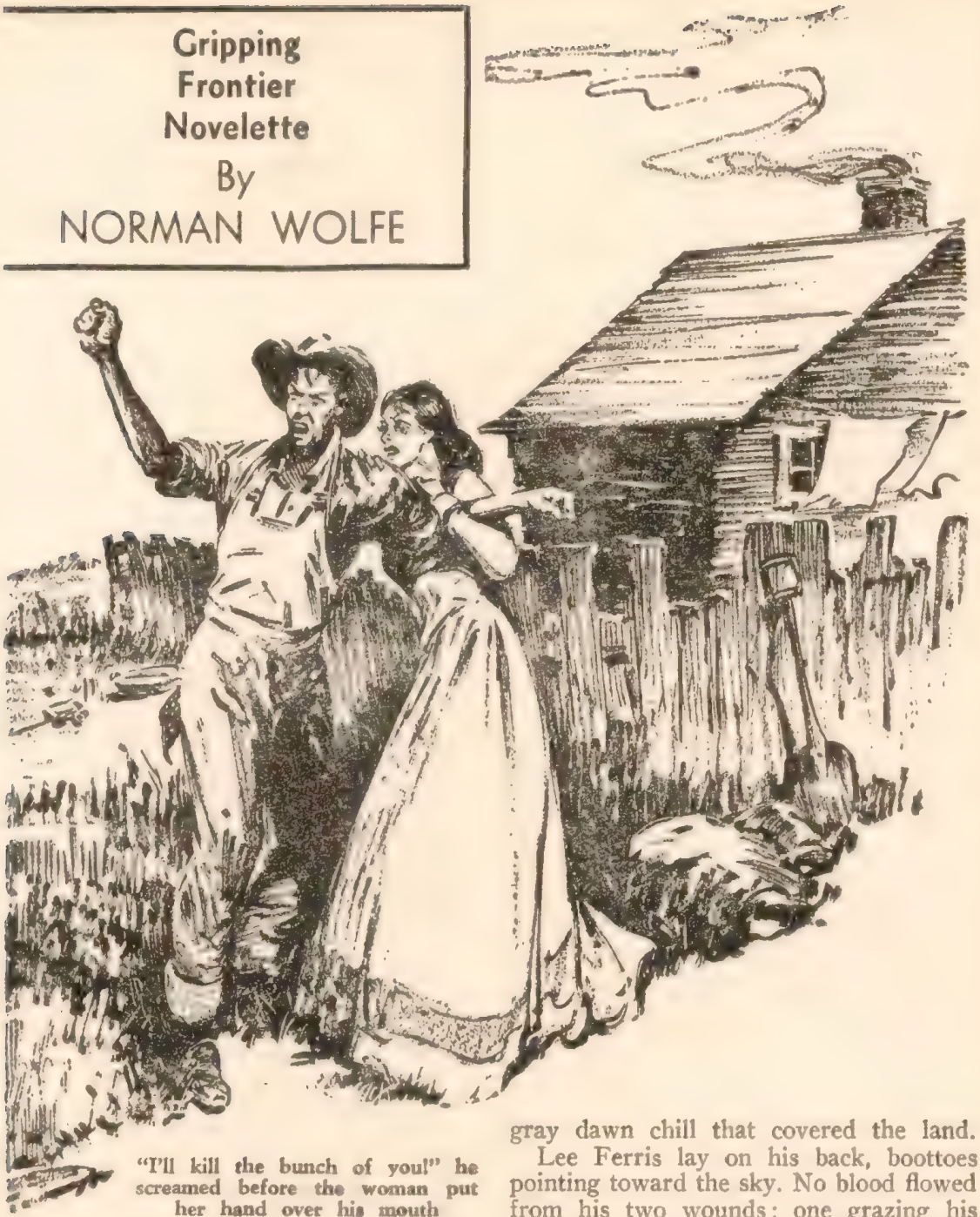
Ex-Skid Row lawyer, Andrew Morton (Humphrey Bogart), unintentionally causes Nick Romano (John Derek) to become one of the more undesirable citizens on the wrong side of the tracks. The electric chair climaxes startling complications. *A grim but powerful picture.*

HE'S HELL ON HOEMEN!

A farmer born, Lee Ferris won his way to a cattle-king's risky throne, charged by the cowmen's steel-hard code to wipe out those same hoemen—whose rugged red blood had sired him!

Gripping Frontier Novelette

By NORMAN WOLFE



"I'll kill the bunch of you!" he screamed before the woman put her hand over his mouth

CHAPTER ONE

Cattlemen's Judas Samaritan

THE MAN lying on the ground was absolutely still. There was no breath moving his chest; no pulse under temple or wrist; there was no warmth rising from the body against the gray dawn chill that covered the land.

Lee Ferris lay on his back, boottoes pointing toward the sky. No blood flowed from his two wounds; one grazing his right temple, another in his left breast. Only holes in coat and shirt were visible. He was six foot three, and a weight of a hundred and eighty pounds.

Fifty yards away smouldered the last remains of Nester Galeen's burned out shack. Wagonshed and corn crib were gone too. The coals of the cobs still glowed in a shallow heap. Imagine raising corn in cattle country!

The wisp of black smoke, rising straight

into the dead air like a ghost of things past and done, seemed the only sign of life. But why had the buzzards, sailing smoothly overhead, not plummeted to earth long ago to feast upon eyes and entrails? Why had coyotes, circling from brow of woods to smoking ruin and back, not come all the way to the prey on the ground and made their bargains with the carrion-eaters from above?

Under the deep shadow of a stand of cottonwoods something stirred. A proud head rose and glanced nervously at Lee Ferris, then fell to grazing again, as if held to that thing in the clearing by an invisible picket rope.

The men who had shot Lee Ferris had wanted to take his body across the saddle of that red Morgan-blooded horse, to carry it into Sioux Pass for burial. They wanted to have the thing done and over with, the evidence pat and finished, further sealing the fate of Nester Galeen.

But the red horse had not wanted it so. It was an unusual horse, this Morgan-blooded one. For one of its kind it had a rare intelligence coupled with a violent love and devotion to its master.

When the men came to lift the body, the horse had suddenly come trotting up, slender hoofs spanking the earth, a wild cry in its throat from upthrust head. Try as they would the horse was there kicking and calling its challenge, and none of their wonted horsetalk would soothe this animal.

A gunhammer had clicked. "We'll give that red critter a bullet—"

But a heavy voice called in protest, "Larsen! Hold it, Larsen! You don't shoot a horse like that, man!"

The swarthy, brawny Larsen grunted. "Well, what the hell then?"

"We can't take time to fuss with this now. We'll leave him lay and come back later and put a rope on this red one. What's the difference whether we cart him along now or later They can't go against my word—and they'll see him dead anyway."

So they were horsemen, after all; they could not shoot their enemy's mount, even if the enemy lay quietly under their guns.

Then there was the voice, calling out in shrill desperation from Galeen, the nester, bound hand and foot, a prisoner. "There, see, I tell you! It's an omen! You'll pay for this yet!"

The knots of a fist smashed Galeen's mouth and nose, making them bleed. Galeen staggered to the ground. Larsen's huge hands then lifted the man, and half threw, half thrust him into the saddle. Galeen could do nothing.

"Well, let's get out of here. . . ."

Within seconds the four men were riding away, leading their captive. They left only stillness behind them, and the body of Lee Ferris and the big red horse grazing nervously.

IT seemed to Lee Ferris he was crossing a great river, filled with slow-moving, milling people and cattle. Shapes and faces were gray and hazy. He was a boy in his first saddle . . . now he was in a bar, having his first drink. He remembered the woman and his first fight. . . .

Then he was out of the river riding behind cattle again. But this time the cattle had a special significance; they were *his* cattle, carried *his* brand. He was in Three Pines Valley and getting wealthy. He was a rancher, and that was something, for he was born in a nester's shack, his father being a hardscrabble nester whose family scratched and grubbed for a living and often starved.

The horse under the cottonwood raised its muzzle and trotted forward, sniffing the air nervously. But there was no sign. The man on the ground was still. Still as in death. . . .

* * *

Now the picture in Ferris' mind was clearer. . . . The jury filed into the hot courtroom. There were only three ranchers on it, the rest were townsmen. All stolid expressions. They didn't look at the crowd but up at the court clerk and Judge Ryerson.

Ryerson, white and gaunt like a faded chicken hawk, leaned forward in his creaky swivel chair and fastened his piercing blue eyes on the jury foreman. "Gentlemen, have you reached a verdict?"

Foreman Edmonds cleared his throat, glanced swiftly at big Clay Randolph on the first bench behind the fence and then at the judge. "We find the defendant not guilty."

"Well, I'll be damned!"

All eyes were on Randolph, whose face was red with rage. Ryerson's gavel rammed down three times on the wood. "Order in the court! Court dismissed! Clear the court!"

"Let's get out of here!"

Randolph's words sounded like a command. He slapped his hat on his head and got up. Lee Ferris, Larsen and Handley did the same. They were four big men, the biggest in The Three Pines Valley. The courtroom watched this angry quartet stalk out. No one seemed to pay any attention to the defendant, Tim Curwood, who stood hunched and shaky before the bench, hardly daring to look back over his shoulder.

As they passed into the street, Lee, brushing shoulders with Randolph in the doorway, said, "You took your chance there. He could have held you for contempt."

"To hell with him!" Randolph snapped. "I'm through with the courts from now on."

The four crossed the street and Randolph shouldered savagely into the Buffalo. Six Double R riders loitered on the saloon porch. They read the verdict in the boss' face. But their expressions didn't change.

Bartender Bart Denslow quickly stacked up bottles and glasses. Randolph sloshed four fingers into his glass and tossed the liquor off. The three others watched him as they drank more slowly. Bill Handley said, "Well, Clay, looks like they're making you eat your brag."

"Bill," Randolph said, "don't say that again."

Larsen said, "Can you imagine letting the dirty son go when we had him dead to rights standing over Double R beef? We should have plugged him then and there."

They could have, and got away with it, too, but Randolph had figured it better politics to take the thing to court and have Curwood hung publicly. That would have set an example, once and for all, to those who were in doubt of Double R's importance in the valley. Only the deal had fizzled and had lost face.

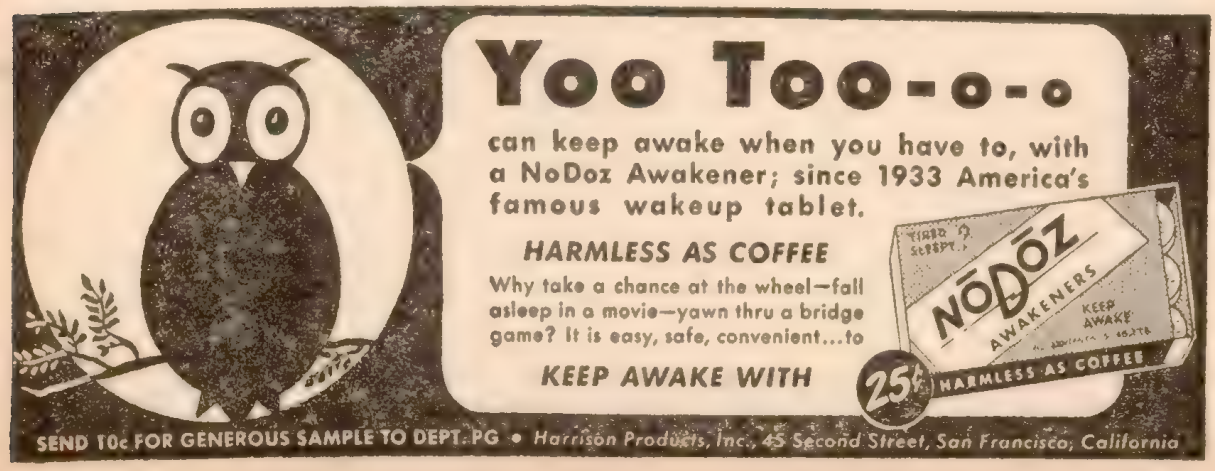
Lee Ferris smelled blood in the air. He said softly, "Well, Clay, maybe they were just mixing justice with mercy." In his mind flashed the picture of the starved-out nester who had taken a wild chance and turned rustler. Curwood had a family to feed.

Randolph spat out an obscenity. "Mercy—hell and damnation! They had it figured out beforehand. They didn't acquit Curwood. They were trying to rub *my* nose in the dirt. Well, I don't rub that easy. I'm not through yet!"

He poured another drink and got set to drink it down. Lee thought of the man's terrible pride and rage. It was like a flag waved, a hot flame spurting. They were hurting *him,* trampling his pride. That was all Randolph could think of. That a man had been on trial for his life and was now adjudged legally free didn't mean a thing to Randolph.

"Well, what's coming next?" Handley asked.

Clay stood hunched over his drink. "He won't get out of town alive," he said, as if talking about a cattle shipment. He raised his voice: "Sam."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SAM GARNER, his strawboss, swung a batwing door open and stood in the door, waiting. "Sam," Randolph said evenly, "you let me know when he comes out and what he does. Don't let him leave town!"

Garner's expression didn't change. Lee had never been able to figure what went on behind that surface. "All right," Garner said. The door swung shut again behind him.

Bill Handley was a tall, narrow-shouldered man with curly brown hair. He scowled. "Is that wise, Clay? Now you *will* be in it."

"We're all in it," Randolph snapped. "The four of us. Time has come for a showdown. I don't know what this country thinks it's coming to, refusing to hang nesters who pilfer beef, but I'm damned if I aim to let it go like that. If the law can't respect cattle land the gun will have to do the work instead."

"Now wait a minute," Ferris said. "Better walk softly, Clay. Those are strong words. We need the law too."

Randolph spat on the floor. "We need another judge, you mean. The four of us hold the most land around here. We run the most cattle. It's not for all these rag-tag sons to tell us how the law goes. Either we run this valley or they do, and I don't like the last idea."

Ryerson's conduct of the trial had driven spur-jags in Randolph's hide. He was ambitious, shrewd, hungry for power. He always finished what he started, no matter how. For a moment Lee thought it would have been better if Curwood had been found guilty.

"You're damn right on that!" said Larsen, who usually echoed Randolph. "Where would we be if we started eating their dirt? We can't afford to take this thing lying down."

"Sam," Clay called to the door. "He out yet?" Garner's voice came back from the saloon porch. "He's still in there. Scared, I guess."

"All right, you let me know."

Randolph looked at Bill Handley. "Bill," he said, "they tell me there's a new homesteader down by the spring where Cal Jackman used to squat—on your territory."

Handly said evenly, "I hear something like that." Handley's face was expressionless.

Randolph was riding a mount he couldn't stop; the courthouse defeat was eating him. His next remark had the pistol snap of a command: "Warn him out of there tomorrow, Bill."

The thing was too quick and surprising for Handley. He stood and took that from a man his equal and tried to be casual about it. Ferris, who stood next him, heard his breath suck in. It was the first time Randolph had taken upon himself to issue orders to any of the three others. To ease the tension Lee said, "Now, Clay, that nester, Galeen, is harmless. He's scratching for a living down there. He's no rustler—"

Randolph's voice cut him short. "I don't give a damn what he is or he ain't! He goes out! That much is clear, or is somebody here too big-hearted or soft-brained to know which side his bread is buttered on? We're together in this and we have to stick together."

There was another silence. It seemed suddenly to Lee that this day was made altogether too much of bad silences. He broke this one by turning quietly to Bart Denslow. "How much do I owe, Bart?"

Bart came up and mentioned the sum and Lee paid and left without another word.

Not until he had reached the lobby and was entering upon the gallery outside the hotel did he realize what his action implied. It was rash, he knew, for Randolph was right in one way. They had to stick together to keep their power. Yet something in him was convinced that Ryerson had looked at both sides of the matter when he picked the jury and instructed it. Tim Curwood was a man gone wrong, mostly from need and hunger. He could straighten out if given a chance.

But Randolph would never see that. There was little love lost between him and Lee. He'd make the most of this walking-out gesture.

At this moment pretty Jessie Handley, who was engaged to Clay Randolph, pulled up at the hotel rail in a buckboard. As always the quiet tall girl made Lee stop and pulled all his attention to her. He came to think now that perhaps it was because he was engaged to Bill's sister that Clay found it natural to issue

orders to Handley concerning range affairs.

"How are you, Lee?" When she greeted him she always seemed genuinely interested in him. He wondered if she ever felt any of the same attraction. "Fair enough," he said and walked out into the dust to hand her down. "In town, shopping?"

"A little," she said lightly, "before looking up Clay and Bill." Then she saw the crowd on both sides of the street watching the courthouse. "Today was the trial, wasn't it?"

She was on the boardwalk now, looking at him as he hitched her team. "I guess I didn't pay much attention to it. How did it come out?" There was a sudden concern in her face.

"I don't know just how it came out," Lee said significantly. "But they let Curwood free."

She wrinkled her brow at him. "I'm glad," she said quickly. "Stealing beef is terrible and of course we can't have it go on. But I don't like to see anyone get hanged. I'm glad when somebody is free. I guess I'm just a woman. Maybe a man can better his ways if given a chance. Death comes quick enough to us."

HE HAD to smile up at her. There was a breath-taking warmth playing about her eyes and lips when she spoke like that. It touched something in him and he thought she had better get about looking up Clay. "I guess you wouldn't hurt a fly," he said.

"Yes," she said at once, "if I got mad enough."

His glance ran along the Double R riders and his smile vanished. "Clay isn't liking this a bit," he said.

"I don't suppose . . ." Suddenly she got the full impact of his meaning. These two all of a sudden understood each other and Clay Randolph fully. Her eyes went to the courthouse and to Sam Garner on the street corner. "Where's Curwood?" He shouldn't have got her into this, Lee thought. He said, "You better go about your shopping or you won't get it done."

"But they acquitted him," she said. "The court acquitted him. They can't—"

"Don't worry over it now," he assured her. "You better run along about your shopping."

He heard her draw her breath in. "But I know too, Clay," she said slowly.

The courthouse door opened and Curwood stood at the top of the steps. He started down the steps, then stopped at sight of the men lining the street. His glance came to Sam Garner waiting on the corner.

He seemed to wither as he stood there, understanding what was in store for him. He was like a rabbit suddenly let into a yardful of dogs. His horse was at Dekker's livery, at the other end of the street, and he had no money to pay for the keep he owed.

Sam Garner said something then, and Jessie and Lee saw Randolph, Bill Handley and Larsen come out of the hotel's corner saloon door and take up the watch on Curwood.

Curwood came down the rest of the steps and stood at ground level, stock still, knowing he was a dead man. They might let him get to the rim of town but he would never get away.

Ferris felt Jessie grip on his arm. "Lee, they're not—"

Jessie stared at Clay, seeing the determination in the man's face. She could plead with him but she knew what the answer would be. Randolph wouldn't put up with a second loss of face. Not if it was engineered by a woman, even his fiance. Ferris said softly, "You could do one thing, Jessie, which might save a man's life and ease Clay out of a bad brag at the same time: Get in your board and swing over past the courthouse. Offer Curwood a ride out of town, kind of natural-like . . . Or," he hesitated, "is that beyond you?"

"No, no," she said quickly. "Why should it be? Of course I will."

"I don't know why I'm doing this," he said as she stepped off the boardwalk. "I've had my words with Clay over this. I'll get my horse and join up with you. I'll back you up till Tim gets away."

He unhitched the lead rein of the near horse and she gave him a quick, excited glance as she sawed the team back out into the roadway and swung it around. Randolph, seeing her leave, looked relieved. Apparently he was glad that his wife-to-be had the sense to absent herself at a moment like this.

Ferris, mounting his red horse at the

hotel rail, sensed the almost audible gasp and stir along the street as Jessie Handley, instead of leaving, swung the team to the courthouse steps with a flourish.

"Get in the buckboard man, quick!" she urged.

Ferris, walking his horse up, saw Curwood shaking in his boots, his jaws clacking. A trembling hand reached out for the seat guard, then he controlled himself with a will. "I hadn't ought to trouble you, miss—"

"Get in. Get in!" Jessie snapped.

No man could refuse so gallant an offer. Curwood raised a foot to the wheel hub and jumped aboard. Jessie whipped the horses and tore the buckboard down the street, with Ferris following, shielding the escape with his back.

They traveled in silence for two miles before Curwood spoke. "You can let me off here at this patch of woods, Miss Handley. I'll make out from now on, I guess."

He spoke as a man without friends. The judge and jury had decided to give him his life, but from then on he was on his own. Sioux Pass town held neither respect nor friendship for him. The law speaks the word but stays aloof. Curwood was a man embarrassed by his own presence in behalf of Jessie Handley. He knew what his rescue implied. "And I shouldn't be troubling you further—"

Jessie glanced at Lee riding alongside. "He'll need a horse, Lee."

"You won't have the chance of a snowball in hell if you try to foot it from here. The Double R riders know every nook and cranny," Lee said. "Where's your family?"

"Over to Williston Creek . . . the Bruces took them in. They never expected me back. . . ."

Lee saw that Jessie could picture the frantic nester woman and her kids, eating their hearts out, waiting for the inevitable news. Tears stood in the girl's eyes. "We must get him there, Lee. We must!"

She pulled up the team abruptly, her face growing pale. Ahead a group of riders were cutting down to the road from a benchland on the left. Sam Garner and six men had taken a short cut to head them off. To his relief Lee saw that Clay was not among the men.

CHAPTER TWO

Killer's Side of the Fence

CURWOOD sprang from the vehicle to the ground. "A gun, Mister Ferris!" he pleaded desperately. "A gun, in God's name! I'll run for it and maybe I'll have a chance. Don't let them take me to hang." His hand was stretched toward Lee and he spoke to Jessie, "And I'm thanking you, miss, for helping me. . . ."

So he was a man, this nester, not willingly hiding behind a woman when the crisis came. Lee's glance went to the riders, now only a hundred yards away, and his voice came sharply at Curwood, backed by a pointed gun: "Get back in that buckboard, Curwood. Do as I tell you, man!"

Hesitantly Curwood climbed back beside Jessie and sat silently on his end of the seat. "Drive on, Jessie," Lee said softly, "up toward my place."

Jessie drove on then, and Garner and the Double R riders broke from the road and let them pass in silence, the Randolph foreman holding his stolid contemptuous glance on Ferris, and touching his hatbrim curtly to Jessie Handley. The inference was: She was a woman, she did not know what she was doing. Immediately the vehicle passed the riders closed up and took to following the trio at a short distance, the obvious meaning being that when Curwood parted from Lee and Jessie his doom was sealed.

"Keep driving," Lee said then, and wheeled his horse back on the trail to face Garner. The oncoming riders jogged to a halt. They'd do Randolph's bidding to the last drop of blood, he reflected. Such was their loyalty. When they rode for an outfit that was all they knew. If Clay told them to steal beef they'd do that too. Such was the irony of it. Ferris's voice cut across to them, hard and sharp: "When a man is set free by the law he has a twelve hour start on his enemies in *my* book!"

Garner leaned forward over his saddlehorn. "He stole your beef too. He's your enemy too."

"Not for twelve hours."

Sam Garner shook his head, a sprouting hatred for Lee lighting his eyes. "I don't savvy this but there's no law against

riding up this road." He gestured to the men.

"A moment, Garner."

They halted again.

"I'll not be followed. The first man that passes me here gets a bullet in his belly."

This rocked the Double R foreman. He said softly, "You been drinking, Ferris?"

"*Mister* Ferris to you, Garner. You heard me. Now pass on down that road." He nodded the direction. He had not yet touched his gun.

The puzzled Garner hesitated a moment, then slowly began reining his horse around. "We'll meet," he said between his teeth.

"If anything's troubling you, you can have it right now," Lee said.

The foreman jerked his horse to a standstill and the two men considered each other in silence, the others watching. Then Garner slowly wheeled and moved off.

Jessie Handley had given the horses their heads. They were another mile away when Ferris caught the buckboard. "Anybody know where your family's waiting?" he asked Curwood.

"I don't reckon."

"I stopped them back there," Lee said then. "They may or may not follow. Quick, take my white hat here; let me have yours. Mount Red and get going. It's getting dusk. Tie the hat on the cantle when you get through. Red will come home by himself."

Tim Curwood was crying now. Tears ran unashamedly as he stood on the ground, staring from the girl to Ferris. "I'll never forget this. I'll never lay a hand on another man's beef again."

"We know you won't," Jessie said softly.

AS THE short man stood reaching for the horn and footing for the stirrup of the big horse, Ferris crammed a twenty dollar bill into his pocket. "You'll need this," he said under his breath. "Get yourself and your family out of this valley. Don't come back."

Curwood swung the horse around, vaulted it from the road and was gone among the trees. Lee turned and climbed to the seat of the buckboard. "Well, you can drive back to town now and get on with your shopping, Jessie," he said quietly.

She shook up the reins and started the team in the direction of Lee's ranch. "I've got no heart for shopping now. I'll carry you home."

They made the distance in silence, eventually pulling up near Ferris' yard gate. "I'd ask you in for a cup of coffee," he said, flinging Curwood's hat onto a corral post, "but maybe you want to hurry back. Where will you stand with Clay now? I apologize for getting you into this."

"That's for Clay to worry over," she said proudly. "And don't apologize. It hurt me to see that man there on the courthouse steps. I'm a woman, but for you maybe it's a different thing. You and Bill and Clay and that Larsen have common interests. It was a crazy thing to do."

"Perhaps I'm a crazy man," he said.

She looked at him swiftly. "No . . . not crazy . . ."

And then, suddenly, unexpectedly, she

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was in his arms, and his mouth was drinking hungrily of her lips. And she lay there yielding, yet tense, as if she had for too long wanted it to be so. In this frantic moment, as time stopped moving, they clung savagely to each other. "Lee," she murmured. "Lee. Lee!"

He wondered if this was why he had disliked Randolph so long? This woman was too good for a man like Clay. He disengaged himself and swept the yard with his glance. No one had seen them. He got down from the buckboard but kept holding her hand. "God knows where we stand now, Jessie," he said.

She shook her head. "We have some long thinking to do." She slowly wheeled the team and headed back for town. But now a bond was sealed between them, and it held him to the spot long after she was out of sight, stirring his mind and heart with its foreboding of trouble to come. . . .

* * *

He spent a restless night and came out on the gallery after breakfast to see Big Red trotting around in the cavvy corral. His saddle was on the pole. Ed Roycroft, the wrangler, was giving the beast a straw-rubdown and Ben Tolliver, Lee's foreman, was crossing the yard to the house with Ferris' hat in his hand.

"Came home in the small hours," Ben said. "This was on the cantle."

Lee took the hat and Ben, looking uncomfortable, asked some question about a herd of two-year-olds on hill pasture. Mechanically Ferris gave his instructions, thinking: So he got away. Well, that's that, anyhow.

Ben was leaving the gallery when he suddenly turned. He tried to make his voice light. "Guess you wouldn't have heard, Mr. Ferris, but they got that feller Curwood last night over to Williston Creek."

It was as though somebody had slashed him across the face with a quirt. Rage rolled up through him till he thought his skull would explode with it. His hands shook. He said two words: "Who did?"

"Sam Garner. Picked him off with his rifle. Never knew what hit him." Tolliver made to move on. "Well, it goes to show you—"

"Tell Ed to saddle Red."

"Sure." Ben was troubled. He shifted his feet, watching Ferris' expression. "I don't know just what this is all about. It ain't for me to say. But I can round the boys up quick. Now if there's anything—well, we're right behind you."

Ferris shook his head. "I know you are." He added, "This is personal."

As he rode to town his rage mounted and he tried to plan for future action. But he couldn't. It was in him to seek out Garner but what could he do to the man? It could be said that Garner had observed the twelve hour respite. And behind Garner stood Clay, Bill and Larsen, and he was supposed to stand with them, on their side of the fence. He finally had to admit to himself that he did not even quite know what he was heading to town for. But something drove him. In a way, he even felt a traitor to his own group.

Crossing the swamp flats to Bill Handley's C Bar H territory, he caught up with a rider heading for the benchland where Cal Jackson's old spring was. He veered off the road and followed the man. It was Jessie's brother.

BILL HANDLEY seemed uncomfortable as Lee joined him. They rode in silence. Eventually he said, "A bad mess you got sis into yesterday, Lee. You both had been better out of it. She's still upset over it. And as for Clay . . ."

Lee said, "She heard about them getting Curwood?"

Bill Handley nodded. "I reckon." Then: "Lee, where do you stand? What's grating between you and Clay? Maybe I don't go for his sentiment, but he's right. You see what the country is coming to. The little fellers are bunching up and squeezing us. We got to stand together and bat them back. If a jury can let off a nester who steals beef like they did yesterday—"

"Clay should have shot Curwood when he found him," said Ferris then.

Handley turned in the saddle. "I don't savvy you, Lee."

"Dragging him to court and then killing him against the law's verdict stinks. That's what stinks. Besides there was more to it than that. Curwood was human;

he had his troubes. Troubles are as big for a poor man as for a rich man. Maybe a damn sight bigger, who knows?"

"Sentiment for the underdog, nice as it might be," said Bill gravely, "will never get you and me anywhere, or Clay or Larsen. If we let that town bunch and the scrub ranchers push us we're gone and done for, and you know it. Strike them down and strike them hard. Damn it, man, you sound almost like a nester! What the hell's got into you? I never saw you like this."

"The law's the law, Bill. Maybe I'm remembering that I was born in a nester's shack. The law being equal for all enabled me to become a rancher. I'm not for spitting at the law."

"Your sentiment is maybe right, your reasoning wrong. Pick the side of the fence you want, but damn it, stay on it!"

That killed further conversation till Cal Jackman's shack came into sight. Ferris nodded ahead. "Carrying out orders, Bill?"

That jarred Handley. "Coming from you, I'll let it pass, Lee, but it's neither here nor there."

When they reached the shack Hurd Galeen was plowing a kitchen garden. A woman was hanging up washing and two skinny boys of about four and five were playing in the yard near an unfinished corncrib. Two sacks of seed corn lay in the crib. When Galeen's wife saw the riders something made her call the boys into the house. Inside a baby started squalling. The two men rode over to where Galeen had stopped his plow, waiting for them. "Get to it, Bill," Lee said with sudden acid.

Bill Handley bit his lip and did not answer. Galeen wiped the sweat from his brow. "Good morning, Mister Handley, Mister Ferris . . ." He was a young, tight-bitten man about thirty, blue-eyed and freckled and undernourished. A certain anticipation of trouble rode his glance.

Handley leaned forward in the saddle and spoke quietly, though Lee, stirrup-close, could hear him suck in his breath. "Galeen, be gone and out of here by day after tomorrow."

The man staggered as if from a blow. He hadn't expected this from Handley. His jaw sagged. "You don't mean that, Mr. Handley." His face had gone white.

Handley swallowed. "You heard me."

"But I bought this cabin from Cal Jackman. This is free land, government territory. I thought you didn't mind my being here. I ain't interfering with nobody."

"You're on my grazing territory and I don't aim to have you range-spoil my beef to feed your family. Be out of here Wednesday."

"You know I wouldn't spoil no beef, Mr. Handley. What quarters of beef I need I can work for . . ." Galeen's voice rose in pitch with his stubborn excitement. "But how can a man clear out of here like this? I got to get a crop in to feed my family and pay for my grocery stake. I ain't got nowhere to go! I ain't hardly got set here! I don't see how you can ask me—"

"I'm not asking you," Handley said. "You be out of here by Wednesday. You just be out of here. You saw what Curwood got."

"I ain't no rustler!" Galeen shouted, flinging his hands into the air. He turned to Ferris and pleaded, "What do you say, Mr. Ferris? I ain't pushin' nobody here, just usin' this spring—"

Ferris maintained a pokerface. "This isn't my range, Galeen. I've no say in this."

"A man has a right to make a living!"

Handley had had enough, both of himself and of Galeen. He said once more, "You better be out or you might get burned out." He began reining his horse away.

Galeen almost went wild. "I ain't moving out! I ain't! I ain't! Not for nobody! I can pack a gun too, same as you damn' ranchers! I can use it too! I ain't—"

His wife had come running and had taken him by the arm. She began pulling him toward the shack. "I'll kill the bunch of you!" he screamed before the woman put her hand over his mouth.

CHAPTER THREE

Ashes to Ashes. . . .

BILL HANDLEY'S fingers had automatically strayed to his gun at the nester's tirade. Ferris leaned over and tapped his shoulder gently. "He's not

armed, Bill. He's not armed." And Handley eventually let the weeping woman pull her husband away and reined the horse about and started off.

The two men rode along in silence, Lee studying his friend, who always before had been so good-natured and mild. Handley uncomfortably waited for Lee to make some comment. But Lee could find nothing to say; everything seemed wrong. Nothing was right. He wondered about himself and Jessie, about Jessie and Clay. He wondered if Bill had sold his saddle out to Clay Randolph, and why?

When Bill Handley at last turned off the trail to head for his ranch, and extended no invitation, Lee said dryly, "Well, see you at the burning, then," and spurred toward Sioux Pass.

The first thing he noticed when he hit town was Jessie Handley's team and buckboard hitched outside Jim Tolson's general store. Farther down the street, by the Buffalo Hotel rail, he saw the brand of Double R on the hips of mounts, and for a second he had an uncertain flurry in his stomach as to what he would do when faced with Sam Garner. Anger was still strong in him. He had sponsored Curwood, and his sponsorship, right or not, had been violated and mocked. Too, he had felt real sympathy for the man.

An irresistible urge pulled him into Tolson's. Tolson's was large. Jim, fat, lethargic and with the casual indolence that comes with diplomacy, could be seen dawdling over his books in the little far back office. Jessie, the only customer in the place, was going over some bolts of linen by herself at the drygoods counter in the middle of the store. She looked up at the sound of Lee's entrance.

"Catching up on your shopping I see," he said.

The knowledge and resentment over Curwood's fate was heavy in her glance. She said in a low voice, "I don't think I'll ever forgive Clay for that. A man has no right to set himself up as judge and executioner. I'm sick inside from thinking about Curwood and his family."

"I understood it was Sam who did the killing," he said slowly.

"Yes, but it was Clay. Sam was only the hand—"

"I guess Clay thinks he's doing what's right for him; to keep what he has." Lee made a gesture. "Who can tell. Maybe that's the way we big ranchers have to keep in the saddle . . ." There was no conviction in his voice.

She looked at him for a long moment. Then: "Lee, there's something you ought to know. I think someone must have seen us in the buckboard outside your yard yesterday. Bill hinted at it at breakfast this morning. He didn't like it."

Ferris said gravely, "I have no regrets about that. Where do we stand, Jessie?"

Her look gave him his answer but she said, "I'm afraid, Lee. Afraid, and lost. What about Clay? What about Clay?"

"I guess I've loved you for a long time and kept away because of him. Clay and I will have to iron this out between us."

"You don't iron anything like this out with Clay," she said desperately. "Clay's a wild man, fierce in his pride."

Lee's smile was slow. "A man can't claim a woman merely on pride. Even a wild man has to face things." He made ready to go.

"Where are you going now?" she demanded, worry and fear in her eyes.

"Down to the Buffalo for a drink, I guess."

"Lee! Lee!" she said quickly. "Pick the proper time . . . there's a proper time. I'm so afraid."

"I'm not," he said. "Calm yourself. Some things have to be faced." And he went out.

CLAY and Larsen were at the bar when he entered the Buffalo. Two Double R riders were at one end, Sam Garner at the other. Lee stopped in the door and the first to meet his glance was the Randolph foreman. If Garner was jittery he didn't show it. His blue eyes had a little glint of mockery. It were as if the man was silently saying, "If you want to make anything of my killing Curwood, go ahead."

Ferris ignored Garner. He walked up, stood next to Clay and called to Bart Denslow for his bottle of bourbon. He said briefly, "Hello, Clay."

Clay turned deliberately and nodded briefly. Ferris saw now it was all over between him and Randolph. He read hatred in Clay's eyes that nothing would

ever stop. He saw that Clay had knowledge of what had passed between Lee and Jessie. He wondered if it was Garner who had spied upon them. It sickened him to have the news imparted to Clay in that manner. The sooner they had it out and in the open, the better.

But they stood there, side by side, their hatreds sticking out of them like war feathers, toying silently with their drinks, and with Larsen and the men brazenly watching them; watching for the first word, the first move.

It was strange, this. So recently he had ridden stirrup to stirrup with Clay, shared his interests, his drinks and his laughs. And now, because of his own impulse to help an acquitted cattle-robber, they were eons apart, as if they had never known each other. He was about to speak when the swing doors flew open and Judge Ryerson walked in.

This was the judge's time for his before-noon drink, and he never missed it, no matter who or what was in the Buffalo's bar. Denslow's hand was shaking visibly as he poured for the white-haired, ramrod-straight jurist. Ryerson had a dignity, natural and graceful, which would have made all hell's angels take notice. He ignored Clay's presence but nodded briefly to Lee.

Some uncontrollable deviltry in Clay Randolph made the judge's ignoring him grate, and he spat out mockingly, "Make way for the law!"

Ryerson saw the empty bottom of his glass before he set it down. Then he said quietly, "You didn't make much way for it last night."

"That depends on which law you're talking about," Randolph said into the bar mirror. "There seems to be two conceptions of law around here."

THE old man brushed his yellow mustache with a swift forefinger, dropped his coin on the mahogany and wheeled to face Clay directly. The man who had presided over what he believed to be justice stared with hard old eyes at the man who had made bloody mock of that justice. "I know of only one," he said. "And you may have to learn to reckon with it yet."

Clay Randolph's teeth showed. "A threat, eh?"

"The law is above threats," the judge said. "But it is written that he who mounts too high a horse rides for a hard fall. Good-day, sir." He went out as slowly and deliberately as he had come.

Clay was laughing now. "And that," he said with a jerk of his head, "can be made to topple from the saddle too. I haven't yet found a horse I can't manage." He added acidly, "The great champion of the riff-raff and scrub; of nesters and squatters and thieves. They'll find out which saddle the law rides."

A ripple of ready laughter arose from the others, and Clay said, "Fill the glasses, Denslow. Let's drink to the law."

When Bart Denslow's bottle came to Lee's glass, Lee turned the pony upside down. With all of them staring at him he said quietly, "Clay, let's walk down the street. I want to talk with you."

He saw Sam Garner stir and feel for his gun. Clay, stiffening, tossed off his drink. "Talk?" he inquired. "What is there to talk about? You know where I stand. You know what I think of nesters plowing up range, of men who spoil beef and infringe on water rights . . ." There was a white hatred, and a strange worry smoldering behind his eyes as he went on, "and men who go behind other men's backs."

Ferris said softly, "Meaning just what, Clay? I said I wanted to talk to you."

"What good is talk when a man don't know his side of the fence? What good is anything when rotten nester blood shows? I'll clean this country of nesters and squatters and beef-stealers, and of judges

PROTECT YOUR FUTURE!

PROTECT YOUR COUNTRY!

who don't know a man's rights—and of those big-hearted souls who sympathize with them. Talk, hell! Action! A man's actions is what counts!"

There was a clear path between them now. The others had moved. Lee's face felt stiff, as if a sheet of ice had suddenly covered it. It was death for one of them, now or later. He knew that. He said, "Action then, if that it must be. I'm waiting, Clay."

There was the flash of calculation in Randolph's eyes then. He turned white. A quick glance went to Garner, whose thumb now was on his gun butt, but then Clay's pride had the better of it. He managed a stiff smile. "You'll have your wish, Lee, but there's a better and proper time for everything. I'll pick my time."

Larsen's jaw had dropped. Lee heard the hard breathing of the men as he calmly turned and said to Bart Denslow, "How much do I owe, Bart?" He got his change and walked out. . . .

* * *

In the late afternoon as Ferris sat on his gallery, Jessie rode up and stepped out of her saddle. Silently she came up and picked out a chair next to Lee without a word. He put out his hand and covered hers where it lay on the chair arm, but she drew it away and shook her head. "I can't stand it much longer, Lee," she said. "You didn't look me up after you had words with Clay. You didn't tell me what happened."

"Nothing yet," he said lightly. "There's nothing much to tell."

"Except that one of you will get killed," she said bitterly. "And I don't want anyone killed. I don't want *you* killed. Oh, you men are all alike. I'd marry you anytime—today, if you like, if you'd promise to stay out of a quarrel with him."

"Jessie," he said, "you know a man couldn't do a thing like that."

"Why not? Why not? We could go away for a while . . ."

"Because it would be hiding. Clay gave me no chance to talk to him. We'll have to face it out first."

"Clay's gone wild," she said then. "Power has gone to his head. He aims to burn out the nester Galeen if he doesn't move from Handley territory. That's pretty high-handed. I told Bill I don't approve. But the best I could accomplish was to make him stay out of the ruckus. Deep down I don't think he approves either, but he's determined to side with Clay." She clucked her tongue. "I only hope Galeen moves out without any fuss."

"And he may not," Lee said. "And yet there may be a solution to that, and to keeping out of Clay's way at the same time. After that it'll be up to Clay. I'll offer Galeen to place on my territory. I'll see if I can find him some work on the ranch. Who knows, it might kill the storm that's brewing."

"Lee," she said almost happily, reaching for his hand. "I think you're the biggest man in this valley. . . ."

BUT if he had allowed himself even half-heartedly to hope for this as a solution, that hope was crushed the next morning when he neared Galeen's homestead with his offer. Hurd Galeen's rickety wagon came toward him, herded along by three Double R riders. In the wagon sat Mrs. Galeen and the three children on a pile of household goods. The woman was crying, the children whimpering in fright. The three riders seemed none too comfortable about their task. They stopped readily enough when Lee demanded what the trouble was.

"Mr. Ferris," she pleaded in desperation, "he's gone crazy! He's trying to shoot it out with them. He wouldn't leave, says he wants to die in his shack rather than be pushed around. Says maybe somebody else will take up the fight then . . ." She buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

Ferris leaned from the saddle. "Take it easy! I'll see what I can do."

He found Clay, Larsen and Sam Garner, surrounded by half a dozen riders from Larsen's and Clay's outfits, watching the old Jackman shack from the brow of the woods. One of the riders was experimenting with attaching an oilsoaked rag to a ramrod for the purpose of an incendiary shot.

As he dismounted, Lee heard Larsen exclaim, "So he'll get any man who comes near enough to strike a match . . . Well,

we'll fool him." Then the big man whirled and saw who was dismounting. Clay was already scowling. Garner stood by.

"Clay," Lee said, leaving Big Red by trailing rein, "I thought you gave Galeen till Wednesday to get out."

"Today or tomorrow, Lee. Does it make any difference?"

"Maybe, Clay. Perhaps his friends might put up a fight by then, eh." He glanced around him and said bitingly. "Brave men, brave men. Chasing out women and children and fighting one man in a shack. Or did he have to beg you to let them go?"

Clay Randolph almost rocked on his heels at that. "Friends," he said, "such as you, perhaps?"

"Even such as I," said Lee. "Clay, you'll not burn out Hurd Galeen. You'll burn him out over my dead body!"

Sam Garner said between his teeth, "Maybe that's not a bad idea."

Lee gave the man a glance. "Speak to me again, but draw your gun when you do it."

Clay said then, "Lee, get on your horse and get out of here with your nester-loving notions before you lose your head completely, and I lose my temper."

Lee shook his head. "Not this time, Clay. You're the one who has lost his head. You're out of your territory. Why isn't Bill here? Because the Handleys don't approve of this. As for your temper, lose it any time you please."

Hatred cut a path between the two men. From the side Lee felt Garner's attention on him. Clay spoke deliberately over his shoulder, not taking his eyes from Lee, "Jasper, fire that ramrod! Get on with the job!"

"Your horse is getting too high," Lee said, his fingers tensing for his gun. "For the last time, call this off!"

The Double R rider fired the flaming ramrod. Lee's hand, by reflex action, reached for his gun. A rifle shot sounded from the shack and he felt a jar in his left side. Turning slightly he saw Garner firing at him and he immediately returned the fire.

He felt as if a rock had struck his head. A fog enveloped his vision. . . . The ground came up and took him, but he didn't feel it.

Later, as if over a great distance, he heard voices on the background of crackling flames and scattered shots. "He got Garner, damn it!" Larsen said. "You lost a good foreman. But Galeen's bullet hit Ferris, I think; that's the joke. That would make it perfect, though. . . . We'll take Galeen to town and hang him for killing Lee. Any thought of you or Garner going for him will be forgotten. Hey, boys, stop firing. When he comes spitting and coughing from that shack slap a rope

WOLF MAN OF THE CRIMSON ICE

By Walt Coburn

Scheming the death of wrangler Happy Jack, Big Rafe Rattery forced him to face the Scourge of Buffalo Crossing—the mad Scot and his ferocious pack of wolves.

* * *

Plus action-packed novelettes and shorts by T. W. Ford, Philip Ketchum, A. C. Abbott and others—in the May issue . . . on sale April 8th.

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE 15c

on him! We've got the son this time!"

There was the increasing crackle and roar of flames, the sound of hoofs and running feet. A man coughed and spat and cursed. A boot touched the body of Lee Ferris, and Clay said, "This was one argument you didn't win, Lee."

And Larsen's voice again. "Hanging Galeen for it puts everything in the clear for us. Puts you in the clear with Jessie too, savvy?" Then all sounds faded. . . .

LEE FERRIS stirred slowly on the ground. A gradual consciousness came to him and he opened his eyes and saw the sky. His nostrils smelled smoke, and when he at last managed to sit up, and the big red horse came walking eagerly out toward him, he stared bemused at the smouldering ruins of the Galeen home. His aching brain fought for remembrance. Tearing open his shirt he saw blood trickle from a crease wound near his heart. It had stunned him, paralyzed the muscles. The bullet grazing his head had knocked him senseless. He saw blood on the ground near him, and spur marks. A man had lain there: Garner, now being toted away dead. Now things were suddenly clear for he was glad he had killed Garner. For Garner had killed Curwood.

Ferris staggered to his feet and stood swaying till he caught a stirrup strap. He walked his horse to the embattled spring that way and cleared his head in the cool water. He took a big swig from the whiskey flask in his saddlebag.

Anger lifted him into the saddle. The big horse felt it through the spurs that dug and the voice that whispered in its ears. "Ride, Red! Ride for all you're worth!"

And the coyotes and buzzards fled in disappointment. . . .

* * *

They had Hurd Galeen on the tailboard of a wagon under Dekkar's corral gate, across from the courthouse. The crowd milled about excitedly, arguing some with Clay and Larsen and their riders. But the arguments against the lone man standing with his neck in the hangnoose, his wrists lashed behind his back, seemed too strong. Garner was dead; so was Lee Ferris. Hurd Galeen had killed them both when he refused to be evicted from his squatter's hut.

In the excitement no one noticed the rider on the big red horse dashing down Main Street and rolling from the saddle at the courthouse corner. Not till Ferris' voice rang out: "Larsen, cut that rope! Clay, let's get to it!" Seconds after Lee's quick explanation men stormed Larsen and tore the rope from his hands. Galeen was free.

Then it seemed there were only two men in the street, facing each other. Randolph, pale, hard of face, looked at Lee's bloody brow, at his slightly unsteady, spraddled stance, and calculated his chances. They were good.

Lee said, "Is the time proper? There'll never be another."

"I guess . . ."

Both men went for their guns. Lee saw the barrel jump behind Clay's eyes, the smoke bloom from the muzzle. Then the hand went slack, the pistol fell. Clay's jaws opened and his eyes showed their whites as his head went backward. His knees buckled and the master of Double R fell dead in the dust.

Lee stood still for several moments, the revolver in his hand, and looked with pounding head at this enemy who now no longer was an enemy. At this man who now had no ambitions, who had wanted so much and had lost it so quickly. And he wondered how a starved, cattle-stealing nester could have caused all this. "There is only one law," he murmured, and turned on his heel and walked away.

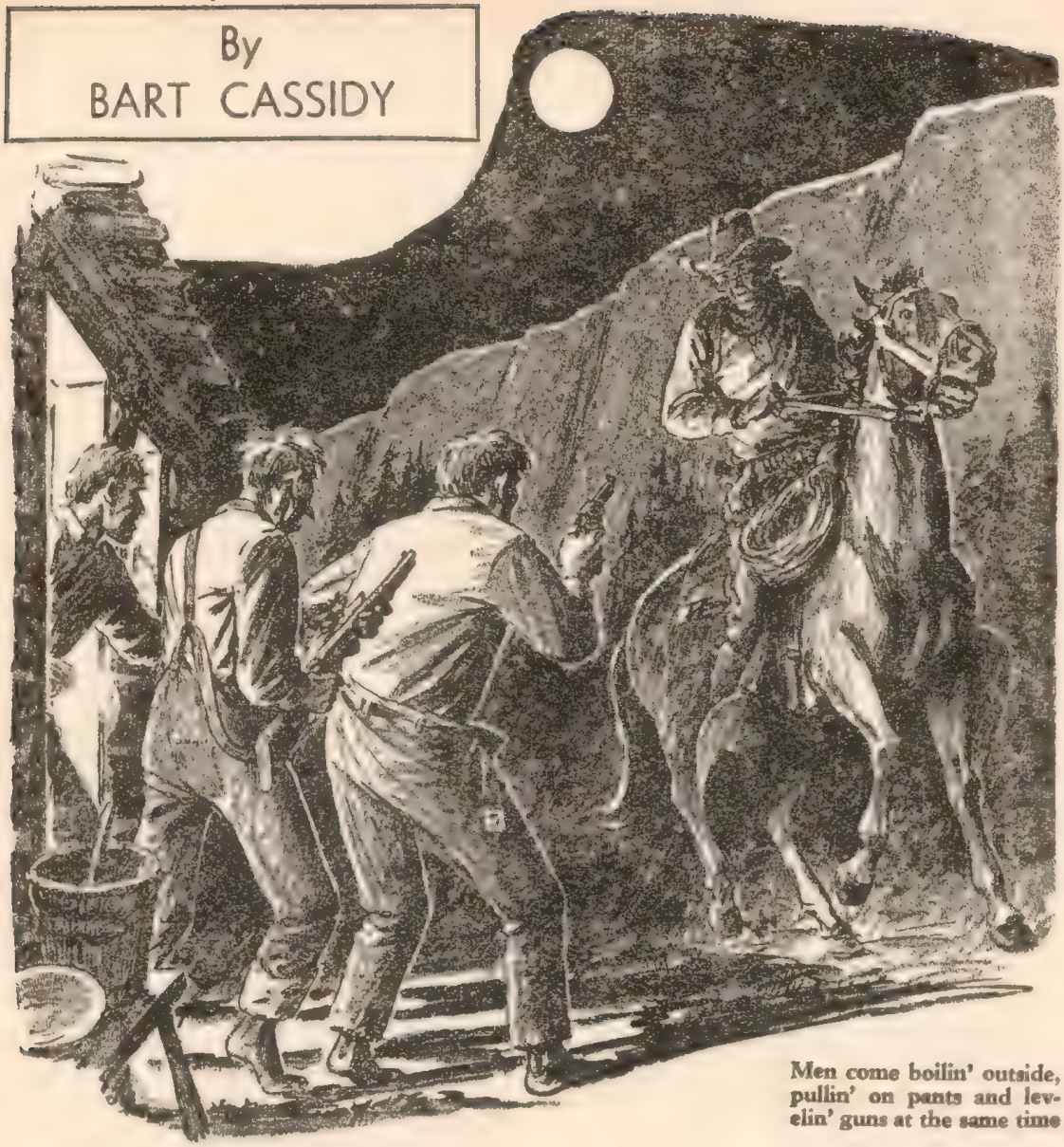
By the hotel Jessie Handley came driving up Yucca Street, headed for the square. Ferris stepped into the road and stopped her team. "Don't go up that way," he said quietly.

The story was too plain in his eyes and she did not ask any question. A sadness, replaced by gladness, came to her face. "But you're wounded," she said.

He turned her team around by the bridle of the near horse, heading it out of town again. "That is for you to tend to from now on," he said, and climbed onto the seat beside her.

THE END

By
BART CASSIDY



Men come boilin' outside, pullin' on pants and levelin' guns at the same time

TENSLEEP—JAIL-BUSTER

One sheriff on his tail wasn't enough, so Tensleep Maxon, fast-ridin' "horse-trader," jumped with both feet into a foaming devil's brew whipped up by the deadly Lowline Seven—just to save a lawman who didn't want to leave his jail!

A BIT OF A thirst an' a rash of brave takes me into Humboldt City that day, with Sheriff Tim Akers an' his hell-rearin' Duncan County posse burnin' up Severn Mountain trails behind me. I'm bankin' heavy on Tim never expectin' the unexpected an' ride up Humboldt's main drag bold as dammit, Hassan prancin' purty on his sore hoofs, me settin' straight an' proud on my galled saddle seat.

It's a quiet Wednesday afternoon an' nobody seems especially interested as I

stable Hassan on double oats, traipse to the Bearpaw Saloon for a couple transfusions of tiger blood an' then enter the Canton Kitchen for my first square meal in two weeks. I even sandwich in a haircut an' shave at the Palace Tonsorial Emporium, an' still only use up an hour an' a half. Both me an' Hassan has took on a new lease on life an' I'm pattin' myself on the back that nobody's recognized me an' that Sheriff Akers hasn't caught up, as I mount an' lope across the flats an' up the Rattlesnake Hill grade.

It's deep dusk an' we're oozin' through the cedar breaks, wonderin' whether to head north across the Uncompagres or south into the Strip, when the age-old challenge jerks me outa my self-satisfied doze. *"Hands up!"*

He steps into the trail, blockin' the way —a stocky, badger-gray man who's grim as a blizzard sky as he levels a big, black six-shooter at me, steady—awful steady. Cripes! An' a star on his vest! I slowly lift my hands. "Howdy, Sheriff," I smirk, rueful. "I gambled on luxury an' lost my taw. You win. What's next?"

"Light down," he commands, cheerless, an' dehorns me as I dismount. "You're acting skittish an' boogery, Tensleep. Sheriff Akers got you worried, mebby?"

"You got the best of me, Sheriff, but we plumb agree on Tim Akers. He's shore nothin' if not persistent."

He grins. "If you liver right, fella, you wouldn't have the law chousin' you this-away."

"So what?" I snap. "I live accordin' to my lights. All I did to Tim Akers was to stick my beak into his county, mindin' my own business, trompin' nobody's toes. But he's bounty hungry an' lookin' to'rds election day, next month." I let a sneer creep in. "Mebbyso your aims is likewise, eh?"

He smiles, patient. "Wrong, Tensleep. I've got a year yet before I have to campaign, an' I hate a hunter after head money. Nope, after hearin' me, you're free to go where you're headin'. You wouldn't remember me, I take it."

I look him over close—a colorless, washed-out little man with sad eyes an' down-curvin' lips. "Can't say that I do, Sheriff. Should I know you?"

He shakes his towsy head, pouches his gun an' hands me mine. "Not really, I suppose. You mind, some years ago, you outrode a posse while carrying Cort Slavins' baby to the doctor?"

"I'll not forget that," I say, grim. "I rode High Ball to death, one of the best ponies I ever owned. What about it?"

"I'm Peck Harney," he says. "Successor to the sheriff who chased you that day. The baby you saved—a purty gal of ten now—is my daughter Minnie's oldest child. She's married again, a minin' man an' good husband. She prays a prayer for you every night, Tensleep, an' I'm way out yonder in your debt."

"Not at all," I disclaim, modest. "All I done was to skin a human skunk an' take a sick kid to a medico, which I'd have did the same for a sick dogie. Now that we're all introduced proper, Sheriff, what comes next?"

HE ACTS uncomfortable, embarrassed. "I don't blame you for thinkin' me a bounty hunter, Tensleep. Most sheriffs are. But this is something else. I spotted you leaving town, headed you by a short-cut trail an' waited so as to wau-wau you. I'm in some bad trouble. You helped my gal once an' I was hopin' mebby you'd help me."

"Help? Such as how, Harney?"

His jaw sets. "I got a boy, Tensleep. Dean's twenty-one, wild an' hellacious but not downright bad. He's keepin' bad company an' now . . . now I get this." He hands me a greasy paper on which is wrote . . .

Peck Harney: Pungle up 5000 simoleons or the buzzards will fat up on Dean's carcass. Fetch the money to Howling Spring, Sunday next, an come alone. Two words—keep mum —are enough for a wise man.

Calico.

"Who's Calico?" I ask.

"Leader of the Lowline Seven, a renebade gang holed up in the badlands. They rustle stock, rob stages an' generally make themselfs obnoxious. I'm in bad with the voters 'cause I don't nab them wild-born sons." He snorts, scornful. "What a chance."

"An' you're askin' me to nab 'em?" I croak, liftin' my brows. "Holy smoke!"

He chuckles, mirthless. "Not exactly, Tensleep. It struck me that you, with your well-known . . . er . . . love of horses, might not be a bad prospect to contact that wild bunch."

"Contact 'em?" I hoot. "What for, Sheriff? I ain't that ambitious socially an' furthermore I ain't got no proper sponsor, as the feller said. I imagine them boys insist on bein' introduced seemly an' by the right people."

"They won't harm you, once they know you're Tensleep. Whereas they're fair droolin' to get me in their clutches. If you'd take the ransom money out to 'em an' then fetch my boy back. . . . oh, don't misunderstand. I ain't scairt to face them hellions, but I dassent leave my jail unguarded while I hunt 'em."

"Don't, eh? Howcome? Who you got in jail?"

He acts like a man who don't want to talk but can't find an excuse for silence. "Mebby I'm a fool, Tensleep," he sighs, "but no man can say I'm a crooked fool. I'm feedin' Bill Hawks, my only prisoner in a year, a silk-handed man of no work, free spender, man about town. He's brother to Kirby Hawks, president of the Humboldt State Bank, pillar of the church an' head of the town council. Mebby you think I ain't stirred up a hornet's nest in arrestin' Bill. Mebby you think I haven't committed political suicide."

"What did he do, Sheriff? An' howcome his banker brother don't bail him out?"

"Kirby Hawks has disowned Bill, I reckon, an' anyway murder ain't bailable. Bill an' his gang, held up the Humboldt-Provo stage, killin' the guard an' stealin' ten thousand consigned to Kirby's bank. I got a witness that'll swear Bill fired the fatal shot. It all ties in with my long suspicion that the source of Bill's spendin' money wasn't his brother Kirby."

"You wouldn't be insinuatin' that Kirby's black sheep brother would be travelin' with the Lowline Seven, would you?"

"Insinuatin', my eye! I'm certain of it, Tensleep. I watched him ride in after that stage job, untie heavy bags from his saddle an' take 'em into the bank. I peeked an' saw him an' Kirby countin' an' stackin' gold coins. When I walked in, Kirby busted a gallus sweepin' the gold into sacks an' poppin' 'em into the vault. One coin had fell off the counter an' I glaumed onto it. A new coin minted in Denver, as was the money stole from the stagecoach. I arrest Bill an' as I lead him out, Kirby's abusin' him, not me. That's the first time I ever looked on Kirby Hawks as a hypocrite."

"Or something worse," I add.

"Or something worse," he echoes. "But with him or without him, five minutes after I leave town with that ransom money, the wild ones will have Bill freed." He looks around, sorta frightened. "Mebby he's free now . . . if anybody saw me quit town. I thought if you'd be kind enough to—"

"Cripes!" I blat. "It's a ticket to Boothill! It's dynamite. It's a loaded pistol at my temple unless ten thousand is really in that ransom package. An' how would any small-time sheriff get that kind of money? No, Harney, if I took that sort of a job I should have my head examined. How do I get to this Lowline Gang?"

He starts an' looks at me outa wide, tragic eyes that are suddenly spoutin' tears. He grabs at my hand, blurtin': "Thanks, Tensleep. I knowed I could depend on you." An' he turns away, to hide his feelin's.

SOMETHING less'n two hours later, I'm inside the Humboldt jail, waiting for Peck Harney to fetch a horse with the ransom money. Or a reasonable facsimile thereof, as the shyster said. A cough from the cell block reminds me of Bill Hawks an' stirs ideas in my *cabeza*. Carryin' the lamp, I go in for a look at the prisoner, who's settin' on his cot, a plain-to-read hopefulness under his hide.

"Well," he snarls, ugly. "Reckon you'll know me next time you see me?"

"Hope so, Bill." I'm marvelin' at so slick a gent mixin' in with lousy renegades. "Yep, I sure do hope so. I'd hate to turn the wrong man loose."

He comes out of the feathers like a coyote-caught hen, boundin' to the bars. "You're peelin' this offa me?" he gasps. "Did Kirby buy that damn-fool sheriff? Or are you from the boys? Don't stand

there! Open up the damn door an'—"

"Whoa," I snap. "It ain't that easy, seein' you was damn' fool enough to kill that stage guard. Nobody sent me, strictly speakin'. I tolled the sheriff aside an' I'm here. You're there. You want out an' got money. I aim to make tracks with money in my jeans. We oughta be able to get together, you reckon?"

His knuckles show white against the bars. His eyes glow like burnt holes in a blanket. "Who are you?" he grits. "What's your game?"

"Me?" I smirk. "I'm Dollar Bill Jones, the financeer of the Jones family. What is it worth to you to be free of this jailhouse?"

"I haven't any money myself, Jones," he whines, plaintive, "but. . . ."

"A man can't eat *buts,*" I snap, an' turn to go out. He calls me back.

"Wait! Let me out an' I'll get you money, big money!"

"That one's got mould on it," I sneer. "Is that source your rich brother?"

"Kirby?" His lips curl. "I should say not. He might help if it didn't cost him. No, I'm lookin' for help from some other boys who—"

"Tell me who they are an' if they'll put out two hundred dollars, I'll have you out in jig time. Tell me who to see an' where at an'—"

"I can't do that, Jones."

"It's bin nice meeting you, Bill," I tell him, an' turn out into the office. He groans an' there's a hopeless flatness to his voice.

"You win, fella. It's a gamble, with the chances even the Spider won't pay. You tell him I'll see he gets it back double, with interest."

"Spider?"

"Spider Martinez, a good friend of mine. Go out the turnpike to the high bridge. Drop into Deer Creek an' follow up-stream to the first big canyon coming in from the left. Take up that, through the box, to the water meadow. You'll see the cabins on your right. Spider may want guarantees an' God help you if you try to run a whizzer on them boys."

"Whizzer? Who, me?" I act scairt. "Sa-a-ay, that wouldn't be the Lowliners, would it?"

"What gave you that idea?"

"If it is, I can't take the risk of that bunch for two hundred paltry dollars."

"Don't worry," he laughs. "Won't be much risk. The boys live there like rich an' peaceful cowmen, with nothing to fear from a glandered sheriff. Tell 'em I sent you and they'll treat you good."

"That ain't the way I heard it," I hedge. "Mebby Spider don't care two hundred dollars worth if you're in or out."

"Yes, he does, Jones. I've been one of the Seven ever since Tom Stevens got killed. They're figuring on me to case Kirby's bank. Someday that miser will wake up busted, if I keep my health."

"All right," I give in. "I'll chance it. If Spider's reasonable, I'll have you outa herse by this time tomorrow night." I'm grinnin' as I go to the office an' continue on outside. I'm pleased, havin' learned what I wanted to know about the Lowline Gang hideout. Mebby things won't turn out so bad for Ol' Peck Harney, after all. Not unless his talk somehow gives me away. I find the old boy leaving the livery barn, riding a long-legged saddler an' leading a loaded pack mule.

"You shouldn't uh left my jail unlocked, Tensleep," he scolds. "All them renegades need is half a chance to clean my jail an' burn it to the sills." He lights down, handin' me the reins. "Now, listen. You got ten thousand red gold cartwheels on this jack—my lifetime earnin's. It's for Calico, who'll meet you under the Deer Creek Bridge ten mile west on the turnpike. When he's made sure of it bein' there, he'll turn over my boy an' you'll fetch him here, no matter what he thinks he wants to do. You understand?"

"I don't understand how you figger, Peck," I sneer. "What does Dean come back to? More of the same? To play tag some more with that Lowline outfit?"

"I reckon he's learned his lesson, Tensleep. He'll be glad to settle down, marry some nice gal an' get a job far from Humboldt. Soon as Bill Hawks' convicted, I'll resign an' have time to ride herd on the boy, keepin' him outa mischief." In the moonlight his eyes are starry with dreams for a headstrong boy who likely won't thank him for hornin' into his business. It makes me a litle sick. Likewise it makes me want to go all the way through just for the privilege of jawin' hell

out of said whippersnapper Dean Harney.

I manage to smile, compliment the old gent on his ideas of bringin' up a boy, shake hands an' ride outa Humboldt, leadin' the mousy little mule. A few miles out, I rein into heavy timber an', where a towering cottonwood serves as a marker, I unpack an' picket the jack, cache the ransom money in a clump of wild rose an' ride on, loping easy.

Ten mile out, my pony wakes echoes on the bridge an' stirs little cascades of pebbles down the zig-zag trail leading into the bottoms. It's a nice night, the breeze stirring the willows an' the crick murmuring gentle, babbling mebby of skulduggery it's seen happen here. With goose pimples workin' patterns along my backbone, I rein north an' canter mebbyso a hundred yards when a rapped, "Haul up!" jars the night. Starlight glints off the long barrel of a leveling gun. I halt, liftin' my hands, watchin' the dark figure ooze to'rds me in the gloom.

"If this is a hold-up," I snort, "you shore picked out Poverty's pet disciple."

HE COMES to my stirrup, a squarish hunk of man whose boots crunch ominously in the sand. He looks me over careful, then, "Where you headed, stranger?" he asks.

"Up canyon a piece."

"Lookin' for what?"

"A gent name uh Calico Clock. Know him?"

"Sure I know him. An' when you've found him, then what?" A steely edge creeps into his voice. "Clock's some handy with an iron himself, stranger."

"So I've heard. Faster'n me, I'll concede, without tryin' out his swift. My specialty's jails, not guns."

"Jails? What fer a specialty is jails? Gettin' in? Gettin' out?"

"Both. I bin in an' outa most jails in seven-eight states an' territories. I crack 'em, mister. Crack 'em wide open."

"Yuh don't say," he sneers. "What makes you think Calico's interested in a jail cracker?"

"Interested or not, mister, contactin' him is all in a day's work for me. I bin talkin' to Bill Hawks, in the Humboldt jailhouse—"

"Bill Hawks sent you out here to find Calico?" he raps, ugly. "Why that—"

"Wait a mo'. Bill's in an' wants out. I can get him out for two hundred dollars, which is what Bill thought I'd better talk over personal with Calico Clock. Said to tell him he'd pay back twice the sum with interest."

"Did he say what he'd use for money?" he sneers, an' somehow I know I'm talkin' to Calico in person.

"He aims to take over his brother's money, I reckon."

"Yeah? Where have I heard that before? Go back an' tell Bill we're tired of his promises to polish off Kirby Hawks an' take over the bank. I'm busy here an' I'd a heap rather you'd sift along with your jail crackin'. So long an' good luck. . . ."

"If your pressin' business is waitin' for Peck Harney's ransom money," I quip, "you're plumb wastin' good time. I taken over that mazuma an' cached it away for future needs."

"You—you what?" he yells, startin' like I'd struck him. "Come again."

"I've got the ten thousand hid—an' good. You Lowliners will now cut me in on all deals regardin' Dean Harney an' Bill Hawks, or kiss that money bye-bye, friend."

"Yeah?" he sneers, when he's digested the bad news. "An' who might you be?"

"Maxon! You've heard of me. Tensleep Maxon!"

"The horsethief?" he blats. "Whyn't yuh say so in the beginning? Howcome you step outside your line an' horn into ours?"

"Economic reasons, Calico. I'm broke, busted, financially embarrassed, strapped, short uh funds, flat, insolvent an' outa cash."

"With Harney's ten thousand cached away?" he hollers. "What sorta game you playin', Tensleep? Me, I play games too. I'm callin' your hand. What you holdin'?"

"Ten thousand, Calico. If you figger I'm bluffin', don't hold your breath till the gent comes with Harney's ransom money. The sheriff sent me. I've buried the loot."

"I still call your bluff," he sneers, quiet. "If you had that money, you wouldn't bury it; you'd clear out with it. You tryin' to tell me that you'll take my

promise to cut you into the gang profits an' dig up that ten thousand for an eight way split?"

He's smart, this Calico Clock, an' he's pinnin' me down to bare an' dangerous facts. "On one condition," I tell him. "A dollar's a dollar an' ten thousand is ten thousand. I could ride out with that, but instead I'd rather gamble on some of the big deals Bill Hawks tells me are cookin' in your mind. The big job at the Humboldt bank, for instance."

He settles, glowering, mad clean through. "So Bill spilled his guts, eh? Well, if the deal was up to me, Tensleep, I'd tell you to go to hell, cut Dean Harney's throat an' dump the carcass on his old man's steps. But it happens I ain't got the say-so. I ain't the boss."

"Hogwash!" I holler. "Everybody knows Calico Clock rods the Lowline Seven."

"Nobody knows nothin' about the Lowline Seven!" he snaps, savage. "Meet me here tomorrow night, same time, an' I'll have the boss' answer."

"Fair enough," I agree, movin' to my pony. "I'll be here."

I MOUNT, gallop down-trail, climb the switchbacks to the road, wonderin' how close I am to an anwesr. I roll leisurely across the high bridge, put the spurs home an' get all my pony's got for a long half mile. Then I rein into the willows, dismount an' stand at my animal's head, pinchin' his nostrils to prevent him whickerin'. Within a few minutes there's hoofbeats, growin' louder. Calico Clock passes me, spurrin' hard. I'm tempted to follow him, just to prove my belief that the real leader of the Lowline Seven is Kirby Hawks, the banker. I guess I'm so sure of it I don't want no proof. Anyhow, I got more important business ahead.

Back I go across the bridge, down the zig-zag trail an' up Deer Creek Canyon to the first canyon coming in from the left. Like Bill Hawks described it, the gulch is black, with towerin' walls pinchin' in like cell bars. But not for long. After fifteen minutes splashin' up the shallow watercourse, I ride out onto a wide, grassy meadow. No lights gleam anywhere an' I have trouble locatin' the cabins, they're so perfectly blended against the cliff behind them. It's kind of a tough chore.

Somewhere coyotes are yammerin' an' a couple of dogs are workin' themselves up into a lather, answerin'. Plainly it's no job to be taken on the sneak, so I put spurs to my bay an' lope cabinwards, yellin' like an Apache, callin' the gent Bill Hawks asked me to deal with. "Spider! Spider Martinez! Rout out your boys an' rig your tops!"

From a doorway comes a sleepy: "Who in the everlastin' hell's that?"

A light winks on an' men come boilin' outside, pullin' on pants an' levelin' guns at the same time, a nice trick if you master it. I curb before 'em, light down an' take a kick at them snarlin' curs. "Where's Martinez?" I bawl.

"Right here!" He comes to'rds me, stiffly combative an' ready to kill. A blond young feller with a Spanish name. "What is it? Who are you? What's wrong?"

"I'm Tensleep Maxon!" I say it slow an' plain, hopin' they'll be impressed. "I just came from Calico Clock. He's in the timber, beyond the bridge, standin' off a Duncan County posse that was chasin' me. He taken a slug in the leg sidin' me, so he sent me coyotin' out to raise you. Fill your loops an' let's go. He's facin' bad odds."

"How do I know you ain't lyin'?" raps Spider, suspicious.

"You don't. But what would I gain by lyin' to you?"

He can't answer that one an' he's lookin' me over close when one of his men hollers, "That's Tensleep all right, Spider. I've seen him before."

That cinches it. There's a rush to finish dressin' an' to rope out ponies from the pole corral, out behind. Within five minutes they're mounted an' I'm leadin' 'em out of the meadow. I purposely hold the bay back as we scoot into the gulch an' they've distanced me when I ride out the lower end. "Good huntin', boys," I grin, an' turn back.

I find Dean Harney like I figgered I would—roped in a bed, stiff from bein' tied so long, starved for a cigarette but otherwise unharmed. He grabs my hand an' acts like he's about to cry. "I don't know who you are or why you're freeing me," he sobs, "but I'll never forget you. My dad will reward you suitably. I

promise it.You'll have no cause to fret."

I snort, roll an' light him a cigarette. "It ain't seemly for you to be obligatin' that straight-shootin' dad of yours, Dean," I scold. "In fact, you better play your cards like he wasn't interested in what happens to you. You've been pretty much of a bust as a son; you must certainly know that."

"I know, mister." He hangs his head, shameful. "I've thought it smart to play around with tough-actin' buscaderos. I've made dad a heap of trouble an' useless expense. But when these devils turned on me an' hit dad up for ransom, I learned my lesson. I'll make it up to dad now—"

"Only by doin', Dean. Not by jawin'. Let's get outa here while we can."

We find the corral cluttered with ponies, pick of many raids by the Lowline Seven. My conscience don't trouble me as I haze these fuzztails before me, out through the gorge. Dean knows a way across the mesa to Humboldt City—ten miles longer but avoiding the bridge an' the Humboldt-Mancos Road. We ride into Humboldt just as dawn breaks, an' corral twenty nice ponies.

Down at the jailhouse, drowsy but nevertheless wary, Peck Harney hears the clatter an' comes stiff-leggin' down to investigate. I'll pass by the meetin' between father an' son, but I'll never forget Peck's happy, tear-streaked face as he chokes, "You're a true friend, Tensleep, an' good for me an' mine. Wish I could pay what you've earned."

"Not at all, Sheriff," I say, modest. "So far, it's a pleasure. But the game goes on, a new deal comin' up. I tricked Calico an' his boys an' got the ropes offa Dean. By now they've discovered their mistake an' are settin' forth to correct it. My only chance is to fork my Hassan horse an' get scarce. I'd do it, in a minute, except I hate to leave you alone to face the music."

He spins me about, shovin' me to'rds the barn. "Get along with you, son. I'm paid to face the music; you're not. At that, I'd like nothing better than to pin a deputy's badge on your breast, Tensleep. You get further, take care of yourself an', when Humboldt quiets down, come see us."

"Add on mine for the same," puts in Dean, still an' proud. "I'll be here to side dad till the last cap is cracked, Tensleep, with extra special accounts to settle with the Lowline Seven, once they come in on the trail of these ponies. You take those fuzzies an' head out. An' thanks a million for what you did for me."

HE GIVES me his hand an' a manly grip. I grin, purty sure of him. "Son," I beam. "I see a changed look in you an' admire your fightin' words. But I detest your lack of frankness with your dad. You pay lip service to him even while withholding facts about the dirty so-an'-so who plans to run this county, get your dad's job an' mebby his life. You keep silent about the true leadership of the Lowline Seven because you are afraid of showdown. That right?"

He goes pale, squeezes the butt of the gun he glaumed at the hideaway an' turns his shoulder to me. Old Peck is concerned. "What's this about, Tensleep? Son, what's he drivin' at?"

"Tell him, Dean," I needle him. "Better now than later."

"He's right, dad," gulps Dean. "I'm

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scairt of showdown. Scairt for you, not for myself. Kirby Hawks is the real leader of the Lowline Seven!"

"I've suspected it," says the sheriff, grim. "That alone would account for the way he's abandoned his brother Bill, an' that little gold count in the bank, after the stage robbery. He's a cute customer an'—"

"An' he can't afford to let his weakling brother live to condemn him," I add, breaking into a run toward the jailhouse. It's luck, more'n anything else, that I'm lookin' thataway when the shadow flits across the street an' silently enters the sheriff's office. I ain't took ten steps till the echoes of a shot are rollin' through Humboldt City, with a high, terrible scream sheering through the concussion, muffled by walls.

Behind me, Peck is roaring curses. Dean, remarkably fast of foot, sprints past me an' plunges into his dad's office. Me, scornful of any assassin's high ideals of sacrifice, I sprint to'rds the back of the jail. As I round the corner, that shadow gusts from the back door, throwin' back a crimson pencil of flame. A bullet snicks past me an' I shake out three swift loads, wastin' the last two. The killer stumbles, staggers a few steps an' sprawls. Dean races through the back door an' is first to him. "It's Preacher Pritchard!" he yells. "Good work, Tensleep."

He gets up an' joins me an' together we enter the jail. The sheriff's in Bill Hawks' cell, kneelin' beside the body. Bill is stone dead. It's a good clean job of murder, just the kind you could expect from a renegade such as Kirby Hawks. We move out into Peck's office, rolling cigarettes.

"I'm glad," says Dean, doleful, "that you got the Preacher, Tensleep. Sorry, too, 'cause I'd liked to have got him myself. Most cold-blooded, hateful man I ever knew. The leading spirit of hellaciousness among the Lowline Seven. They won't be half so tough now that he's gone. I think we should go after the rest . . now."

"First things first," mutters the sheriff, staring out the window. "Look what's coming to'rds us."

Cripes! Striding down from the house where Kirby Hawks lives in sort of feudal splendor, come three men, shoulder to shoulder. Gun-hung men, poker-faced, dangerously deliberate. Calico Clock on the left. Spider Martinez on the right. Kirby Hawks in the middle, looking less the banker and more the killer. Peck Harney licks his lips.

"Trouble on the hoof, boys. I've looked forward to this even while dreading it."

"If it gets smoky," murmurs Dean, "I'll take Martinez. He beat me when I was tied an' couldn't hit back."

"I'll take care of Calico," I promise.

"Which leaves the issue between me an' Kirby Hawks," says the sheriff. "It was bound to come. He's crowded me, interfered with my business, threatened me with financial ruin, character disgrace an' even death. Now it's my turn to speak."

NEVER was a man more grim than Peck. Never was a room more tense as echoes of their bootsteps strike in from the walk. Dean is breathing hard an' fast, but hatred is holding him firm. I'm grinning, amused that Tensleep Maxon is siding the law, certain this won't get past the jawin' stage.

Those three come poundin' up the steps an' across the walk. Kirby Hawks shoulders the door open an' lunges in, stubby Calico and cadaverous Spider Martinez flanking him. The way Spider carefully closes an' locks the door wipes the grin off my face. These three mean business—for the undertaker!

"Sheriff!" Kirby Hawks glares from me to Dean an' then to Peck. "I've never approved your methods, but I never believed you were crooked until this morning, when I saw you consorting with this notorious horsethief, Tensleep Maxon."

"To hell with your fancy words, Kirby," snaps Peck. "Looks like you're doing some consorting yourself—with your lieutenants of the Lowline Gang."

"I take that unkindly, Peck," smiles the banker.

"Unkindly or not, Kirby, I'm arresting you as boss of the Lowline Seven. Renegade profits beat banking, don't they? Doubly so if you could get a hand-picked sheriff in office to protect you. What you want here?"

"I'll overlook your slander," grits Kirby Hawks, white an' tense. "You're holding my brother Bill incommunicado. There

was shooting in here a few minutes ago. Knowing your fondness for Maxon and other of Bill's enemies, I half suspect you've had Bill murdered. I demand to see him."

"You're a liar!" I rap. "I never even knew Bill Hawks."

"It's no good, Kirby," says Peck, tired an' patient. "In due course I'll introduce Preacher Pritchard's dying statement that you hired him to kill your own brother. You had to shut Bill's loose mouth, Kirby, before he talked a noose around your neck. . . ."

"Look out!" yells Dean, an' all hell busts wide open in that jailhouse office. Kirby Hawks is drawing an' it's no banker's draw. Spider an' Calico are unlimbering, Calico easily the fastest of the three. Mighty good thing we planned it out beforehand, else evil would have triumphed —as the preacher feller said.

Me an' Calico, we fire together. He misses; I don't. Caught in the throat, Calico lunges against Kirby Hawks, jarring the banker's bullet wide as Peck found his heart with his first shot. Calico is finished. Hawks is kicking out his life on the floor. Spider, with Dean's slug burning his guts, kneels on the floor, squinting across the sights, aiming with terrible deliberation. Despite the bullets Dean's popping into his tough carcass, Spider must have tallied the boy except that I break his gunarm with a snap shot. He rolls over, moans once an' dies.

It's over. The jail's so quiet it aches. "That's that," whispers Peck. "My thanks, boys."

"Who's coming?" barks Dean, nervous. "The rest of the gang comin' along to give us our lumps?"

We follow his glance through the dusty window pane. There, postin' wearily along the street, come a half dozen horsebackers, with more loomin' up behind them. Leading them is—yep, you've guessed it—Sheriff Tim Akers, of Duncan County. The posse has caught up! Cripes!

"It's Akers!" raps Sheriff Harney. "Tensleep, you better—"

"I'm way ahead of you," I call back, lettin' myself out the back. "Keep my name outa this, Peck."

Slippin' along back alleys, I make the barn an' lay a kak on Hassan. He's fat, frisky, rested an' rearin' to go. I swing up an' settle into the leather as he whirls me into the back alley. Akers an' his possemen, preoccupied with a murder, a three-corpse gunfight, food for empty bellies an' assorted barber-shop luxuries, miss my going complete an' lose my trail permanent.

I reckon I should consider myself lucky, comin' off hidewhole through a night's recklessness an' the dawn's gunplay, consolidatin' a sheriff's respect an' sideslippin' the sudden appearance of a bounty-hungry posse that-away. But there's always a fly in the goosegrease, as the feller said. Mostly, I mourn havin' to leave them fine ponies in the Humboldt City corral, an' wonder if Peck an' his boy got any good out of 'em. An' sometimes I wonder if Peck got my letter tellin' him where to find a lonely, picketed mule an' his savings of a lifetime cached in a wild rose thicket. Some day I'll drop in on him an' find out. Get along, Hassan!

• • COME HOME

Smashing Frontier Novel

CHAPTER ONE

Gun-Ghost From Deer Lodge

THERE was no way Case would be able to get close enough without being seen, Deputy Sheriff Thorkel decided, at least in the daytime. At night a good hunter like Case, using the line of cottonwoods up the short lane to Fallon's house from the main road could get within forty yards of the west windows, but from there on it was nothing but bunch grass and two grease bushes, and with Fallon's uncles watching from the windows Case would have to stop. From there he couldn't hit anything but the ceiling, since the house was built so high, and uphill besides.

One of the uncles was sitting on the porch now, his rifle resting across the weathered gray railing. Thorkel went up the lane with the rifle covering him, riding with his hands high so the old man could

Case walked up to Thorkel, the rifle ready. "I told you," he said softly, "to get away from that door."

TO THE KILLING!

By JOHN M. CUNNINGHAM

see they held nothing but reins. The proud, ignorant old man had come all the way over from Roundup on a saddle-mule when he'd heard that his sister Margaret's son was really worried. He hadn't been seen in town once except to buy a can of beans with a greenback folded so small he must have carried it in a tooth cavity. He was too proud to eat Fallon's good beef. Being a sheepman, he'd rather hot up a can of beans than be beholden, but all the same he'd go to hell for a fifth cousin if it was a question of defending one of the family.

Ignorant and proud he sat there, looking down his rifle at Thorkel as Thorkel swung off and dropped his reins, his eyes as hospitable as two bits of ice frozen in a block of granite, probably wondering if this here critter on top of the horse was good to eat or just some new kind of varmint.

A pale, composed face appeared in the doorway behind the old man. "What you want, Thorkel? I'm through talking."

"Tell your uncle I'm an honest man,

Case's bitter prison years must be paid for, minute by lonely minute, in blood of an innocent cattleman—and the honor of an honest lawman!

Fallon," Thorkel said. "If I don't go *baaa* in a minute, he's going to shoot."

"Leave off, Uncle," Fallon said, his eyes not leaving Thorkel's. "He ain't coming in."

The old man's rifle didn't move an inch.

"I just want to ask you something, Fallon."

"It seems to me like you'd be down to the station instead of asking me questions," Fallon said. "You just trying to make it easy for Case?"

"The train isn't due for half an hour. I want to ask you to leave town a couple of days, Fallon. That's all. It isn't much to ask."

Fallon looked at him steadily, watchful and sullen. "I ain't making the trouble. I don't see why as how I ought to get out of here. This is my town." Two more men came out of the door, tall and old like the sheepherder: riflemen, and wanting to prove it.

"It's you people down there," Fallon went on, his voice rising, "that ought to keep Case out of town. You and the old man. Didn't I do the lawful things? What right's he got to come back here and threaten me because I told the truth about him stealing them cows? I done my duty. Why should I get out? Why should I, now?" He stopped for breath.

"It isn't that," Thorkel answered mildly. "I know you did right—by the law—but it's just the politics of the situation, that's all, Fallon. Just in case it's true Case wants to get you. You know I'm for you."

"I know you are sure plumb damn full of talk," Fallon's voice surged out of the doorway. "For an old friend of Case's, you sure are plumb damn interested in getting me out from my house, by God!"

Thorkel looked at the ground quickly, compressing his lips.

"I'll tell you what," Fallon said shrilly. "You people down to the sheriff's office go shoot him dead the minute he gets off that train, that's what. He's threatened me by mail and every whichaway, by God. The day the jury sent him up he threatened me in the court, yes, by God, in the court."

"A man says a lot of things he doesn't really mean when he's sore."

"He meant that, and you can shoot him dadgum dead, by God, Thorkel, or I'll know you for what you are."

Thorkel stood staring at Fallon with his mouth open. He looked at the three big men, standing as immovable as old juniper trees, and looked at the ground as though he would see patience lying there waiting for him to pick it up.

He looked up again. "Then one last thing, Fallon. If I can get Case to swear to leave you alone, will you leave him alone?"

Fallon's eyes hardened. "If he swears such a thing, it'll mean one of two things. Either he's a big blowoff coward ascared to do what he said, or he's tricking me out of my house."

Thorkel shook his head. "Case is no coward, and he never was a liar, Fallon."

"It's a trap! No, by God, it's him or me!"

"Then you're bound to have a killing, is that it?"

"It's none of my asking," Fallon said sullenly.

Thorkel stepped back to his horse. He swung up and sat for a moment, looking at the high façade of Fallon's house. It was a fine old wreck that Fallon had got on a mortgage, a remnant of the lush cattle-days, tall and lofty with a half-pitch roof and a couple of turrets. A tall, gaunt old house as solid as a rock.

The rifle was still pointed at him. He turned his horse and went back down the lane.

THE old man was sitting quiet in his little office, reading a paper the way he always did, looking as though he were going over and over the same word. Thorkel dropped his reins in the gutter and walked in.

"Any luck?" the old man asked without looking up.

Thorkel sat down and didn't answer.

"I didn't think you would," the old man said.

Thorkel flushed slowly. "I'm not licked. Are you going to let me handle it my way or not?"

The old man's lower jaw chumped evenly against his upper, making him look like a beaver at work. The short, neglected bristles on his chin shone soft

silver in the bright light coming through the window. On the roll-top desk at his elbow lay two Colt revolvers, nickel-plated and clean, with smooth ivory grips turned yellow on the edges.

"Just what date is that paper?" Thorkel asked bitterly in the silence. "Haven't you absorbed it all yet? How long you been reading it, anyway? Since 1883?"

The old man turned, spurted tobacco juice into a cuspidor and went back into his paper again. "Your star's goin' to fall off," he said calmly. "You better fix that pin."

Thorkel's fingers trembled a little as he repinned the small star on his shirt. "Andy, quit stalling. I only got about ten minutes left. For God's sake, get your head out from under that rag and talk sense to me fast."

"I talked sense yesterday, Jim. I'm going to meet him at the train and tell him if he gets off those cars he'll have to fight, right there at the station. I've thought over your idea. You ain't got brains enough to work it." The sheriff chewed absently and laid the paper down, covering his knees. "You can't be friends with the outlawed, Jim. You can't even feel like being friends. They's likeable ones, I know, but you can't like them. Sooner or later they get you in a tight."

"Listen," Thorkel said, "me and Case and Mowbrie grew up together, Andy. I know Case. You don't have to handle him with a gun. He's not a rat."

"He's a rat now. He's going to try to kill Fallon and everybody knows it."

"If he was a rat he'd have kept his mouth shut and come back here quiet and killed Fallon in bed."

"He's a wrong-headed rat. They're all rats."

"Yeah. Once they've been in the pen, they're rats. What kind of thinking is that? You're geting old, Andy."

"Old!" The old man turned his head and looked at Thorkel. "You're getting awful damn' cocky."

"Two years working under you would grow feathers on a billiard ball."

The old man looked down at the window sill. "You keep on, son, you're going to hurt my feelings."

"I've only got a few minutes left, Andy. Give me this job and give it to me clean. You get to hell out and go fishing."

The old man settled himself deeper into his chair. "I got no business leaving it to a deputy. Especially a deputy that grew up with him. I won't have Fallon killed, Jim, even if he does half-deserve it. I won't have that kind of thing."

Thorkel looked at the floor. "If you don't give me this job clean, you won't have a deputy."

"How's that you said?"

"They'd say you couldn't trust me with Case. They'd say I wasn't any good in a pinch. You think they'd trust me with anything after that?"

The old man sat brooding silently.

"They'll say it only took a thing like this to show me up. They'll say I never was any good, and you was a damn fool to give me this job, and it just goes to show, and birds of a feather and all that bullcrap. Either I handle this alone, or I quit."

THE old man eased down in the chair. "How much time would you need? If you're going to change Case's mind, you can do it quick or never. I want it settled way before dark, Jim. I won't have Case roaming around loose in the dark. He's too smart."

"Give me three hours. Till three o'clock."

The old man gnawed pensively at his lower lip. "Suppose I do, and suppose Case gets past you and kills Fallon? What're they going to say? They'll say I was too stupid not to know you'd rat on me, son, that's what. And that's the end of me as sheriff, and I'm too old to work."

"All right," Thorkel said, standing up. "I guess it has to be the end of one of us, and I can take it better. Being younger." He turned toward the door.

The old man's face turned faintly pink. "Sit down," he said in a voice that made Thorkel's eyes widen. Thorkel sat.

"Any time I need be beholden to some young apprentice pup deputy that I took out of a saloon and whose repute still is none too sweet, son, I'll lay over and die," He half-turned in the chair toward Thorkel. His old blue eyes looked right into Thorkel, as clear and cutting as diamonds. "All right. I'll let you handle it."

He chewed slowly. "But if Case gets past you, if he kills Fallon, you're going to pay. They'll say you let him. You're up against it, being Case's friend. If I have to go after Case, I'll be going after you too, Jim, and I won't be fooling. You got till three o'clock." The eyes were round and hard and empty, about as human as the ends of a couple of glass tubes. Thorkel looked away quickly.

He stood up. The old man picked up his paper and began reading it again, chewing absently.

Thorkel looked at him a moment, and then soberly at the two ivory-handled guns on the desk beside him, and then back at the old man, to see if he had anything more to say.

The old man was a thousand miles away. Thorkel went out quietly.

THORKEL mounted his horse, rode across the street to the livery, and got off again. There was no more of a crowd along the boardwalks than there ever was —a wagon and a buckboard in front of the hardware and drygoods, three hipshot nags in front of the largest of the three saloons, and a dog dead or asleep in the shade of the municipal horse trough. In all, four people watched Thorkel dismount and drape his reins over the hitch rail. He looked at none of them, and went through the big, dark doorway of the horse barn without any useless questions being asked.

Mowbrie was at the forge in the walled-off shop in the corner of the barn, grinding the bellows around with one tough hand while he jammed a red-hot shoe in and out of the fire with the other.

"Got the horse ready, Mowbrie?" Thorkel asked, standing on the cool dirt floor between the two lines of stalls.

"In the third stall." Mowbrie picked up a hammer and bounced it on the anvil. "I got the roast cooking." He laid the hammer down and pulled a heavy, dirty forearm across his black eyebrows. "Damn it, Jim, we shouldn't never have let Tod out on his own. We should have met him at the prison in Deer Lodge. It's too late to stop him."

"No, it isn't. He shouldn't never have stolen those cows, Mobrie. The three of us shouldn't never have been so damn fresh, back then. So cocky and smart, thinking we could run hawgwild and nothing would happen one day. But it isn't too late."

Mowbrie hit the anvil and the hammer bounced two feet in the air.

"Don't get sore," Thorkel said. "We got one sorehead too many now."

Mowbrie tried to smile. "Well, I got the hunting stuff all packed, Jim. It's up to you now."

"Sure," Thorkel smiled. "It's going to work out all right. You just wait and see. Tomorrow, you'll see. We'll be up the mountains, the three of us, having one hell of a time. Just like the old days, Mowbrie. You'll see."

He walked over to the third stall and got out the saddled horse. He looked at its sleek sides and shiny coat. "That ought to soften him, if anything will, Mowbrie. Keeping his horse for two years for nothing, not even renting it out."

Mowbrie stood in the door of the shop, smiling at the horse. "I don't want you should tell him, Jim. Not unless he notices it of himself. We don't want Tod should feel beholden, Jim."

"All right," Thorkel said, leading the horse out. "I won't . . ."

Thorkel left the horses behind the station, groundhitched in the shade. As he rounded the corner toward the tracks, the telegraph rattled briskly out through an open window and he stopped to listen. The two glistening silver rails lay empty before him, bending gradually away eastward across the far plain of yellow grass. There was nothing coming, as far as he could see.

He headed for the door, the telegraph rattling after him like an old widow snake with a sprained tail, and as he shut the station-master's door behind him and stood in the dry gloom of the office, trying to see what he was looking at, the shiny little brass witch spat at him twice and shut up.

The station-master was half-lying across his desk with the back of his touseled head toward the door, one hand holding up his thinking apparatus while he studied a picture of a locomotive in a fat black book. A half-empty pitcher of flat beer with drunk and drowned flies

floating or swimming idly around in it, stood beside the telegraph machine, green-yellow and lukewarm.

"What'd you find out about Case?" Thorkel asked, crossing to the counter.

The station-master rolled over fast, coming up to a sitting position. "Oh," he said. "You." He scrabbled through a scatter of yellow paper slips beside the telegraph. He picked one up, held it to his nose with both hands as though he were smelling it, got his eyes focused right, and shoved it away.

Thorkel looked sideways at the wall clock, ticking away on three legs up in the gloom by itself. The station-master frowned at the paper as though he coudn't make out his own writing.

"Was he armed?" Thorkel asked. "That's what I got to know."

THE man wiped his upper lip with the hairs on the back of his wrist, and frowned with renewed concentration at the paper.

"Didn't you find out?" Thorkel asked, his voice gentle. "I've got to know."

The station-master looked at him with furtive suspicion, checking to see if the deputy's star was still there. He belched and put his hand to his mouth. "Well," he said slowly, "he got on the train, all right." He re-examined the paper.

"Just tell me this," Thorkel asked, leaning on the counter. "Was he armed? Did he get any arms? Do you know that?"

The yellow paper curved and crinkled in the station-master's grip. He was sitting bolt upright and his face grew strained. "You was a friend of his, Thorkel. I done all this," he said, shaking the paper, "for the old man, not for you. Just why the hell I should tell you—"

He stopped. Silence slowly filled in over the end of his sentence, and the lame clock gently tamped it down. Thorkel leaned there and just looked at him.

The station-master slowly lowered his eyes to the paper again, and the stiffness went out of his back. "He got into Butte from Deer Lodge last night," he said. "So the sheriff down to Butte says here. He went to some woman's house in Butte. I don't know who. Don't say, here. This morning he went up to a hardware and bought a box of .45 shells. Then he got on the train." He put the paper down on the desk and said quickly, "To come up here. By God."

Thorkel looked at the clock. "Five minutes," he said. "You sure she isn't late?"

The station-master stared glumly at the paper on the desk. Thorkel turned quietly toward the door.

"What's the old man going to do?" the master asked as Thorkel turned the knob. Thorkel let go of the knob, hot from the sun outside, and looked at the master over the counter. He was staring sadly at his book about locomotives. Thorkel didn't answer.

"Well, how long is Case going to be around? Damn it, a man's got to study to get ahead. How the hell can I study with him around?" He rubbed his hand down over his eyes and nose.

"It won't be long," Thorkel said. "It ought to be settled by tonight, anyhow." He looked at the picture of the engine. "Locomotives. Mighty interesting things, I guess."

The master brightened. He smiled at the picture. "Locomotives," he said. "The finest engines in the world, son."

Thorkel took hold of the doorknob, its heat surprising him again, and stepped out. The world's hot, bright sear of light crossed his eyes, nearly blinding him. He stood listening. Nothing sounded but the high whine of the telegraph wire across the tracks. The rails lay bright and still.

He turned and walked back down the platform toward the horses, stepping on the bright heads of nails which had worked their way up from the boards.

"Locomotives," he said as he looked at the horse he had brought for Case. "Damn all trains!"

CHAPTER TWO

Follow Me—To the Gallows!

THE first faint wail of the engine sounded down across the yellow plain. As it spoke back again from the mountains to the north, Thorkel left the shade and went around to the trackside and stood carefully against the station where nobody could help seeing him. The chalking mustard paint of the wall baked his

shoulderblades through his shirt, and his hands, stuffed into his tight jeans pockets, turned wet.

The train grew slowly, crawling along like some kind of plumed caterpillar, chugging up the long, barely perceptible grade. There was nothing to it but three flatcars stacked with mine timbers, a mail coach and a caboose. The engine was a small nightmare of brass trimming and black iron, roaring smoke through a great, brass-bound funnel and spewing long streamers of vapor from its pistons, like gray side-whiskers on an infuriated politician.

The engine raged past Thorkel and stopped, groaning and panting. The engineer stuck his head out of the cab and scowled backward along the platform. When a solitary figure stepped down from the passenger section of the mail coach, the engineer yanked the throttle open and jerked the train almost from under his feet.

The lone figure stood in the shadow as the moving wall of mine timbers passed behind him, watching Thorkel with the alert immobility of a lizard. With his long skinny body in the black, scarecrow suit, with his long, scrawny neck sticking out the top, and his gray scalp looking like bone through the prison stubble of hair, Case would have been either funny or sad, if it had not been for his face, and the long, rough red hand resting on the butt of a gun stuffed into his pants pocket.

Everything in his face was sharp—the tight, lipless mouth tucked in under the high nose, the eyes, as motionless as stones.

"Welcome home, Tod," Thorkel smiled. "Welcome home."

Case's eyes shifted to the star on Thorkel's shirt. "Where's Mowbrie?" he asked then, his mouth opening to a slit and his voice twanging like a broken trap.

Thorkel pulled his cramped hands out of his pockets and wiped the sweat off his palms on his jeans. "He's cooking up a haunch of venison up at the shack," he answered. "It's about ready to eat, Tod, if you are."

"A deputy," Case said, looking at the star. "A dirty damned deputy. I thought at least maybe you'd be the stinkin' sheriff by now. A dirty damned deputy."

"Sure," Thorkel said. He leaned forward from the wall and rubbed his eye as though there were something in it. "Still learning, Tod."

"Where's the warrant?" Case asked.

"What warrant?"

"Don't tell me that fat old slob didn't have some kind of warrant all written out for me. And you, his deputy, down here waiting."

Thorkel looked at him for a moment. "I said, welcome home, Tod. That's what I said." He watched Tod's eyes open a little and soften from dead gray to blue, like a winter sky breaking for a moment.

"I heard you," Case said. "Just like a stoolie at Deer Lodge. Softening up the new boys. A bottle of booze from the warden for everything you can snitch. What are you getting?"

"I never been to Deer Lodge," Thorkel said. "I haven't ever hardly been out of this county. Where is Deer Lodge?"

"Don't give me that. Where's the old man? Hiding around the corner? You didn't come down here to say hello."

"I never told you any lies, Tod. You're home, that's all. Just home."

CASE looked at him a moment in silence. "Don't kid me," he said. He looked up past Thorkel at the sky, his blue eyes suddenly on the mountains as though he had realized they were there for the first time since he got off the train.

"I was up there last week," Thorkel said. "That's when I got the buck Mowbrie's cooking a piece of. It's been hanging a week, Tod, and you know how Mowbrie can cook venison." He watched Case's eyes, moving minutely from peak to mountain peak, small and quiet, but no longer like the lizard's—a good hunter's eyes, patiently dissecting distant twig from branch, carefully and delicately probing apart the black prong of an antler from the fork of a sapling.

"It was up by Hern Lake," Thorkel went on patiently, watching the blue eyes. "The fishing's just like it used to be, and there's plenty of deer waiting for a good hunt. I figured we three would go up the fork from old man Murphy's cabin. You remember, where we seen the big buck that time, the one you went on up the mountain after, and got the lion instead. You remember. The first time Mowbrie

tried frog legs. You remember that, too."

Tiny wrinkles appeared at the corners of Case's eyes, and Thorkel watched the conception of a smile with the same intent care Case gave the distant mountains.

"There's ram up there too, Tod, up higher—new rams, they must have come in from some other range. We bought a new rifle we were waiting for you to try, Tod." His voice hurried ahead of him and he tried to slow it up. "Mowbrie and I thought—we got the stuff all packed. Now three weeks up there, Tod, it would be just like the old times—"

He saw the smile go and the live blue fade out of Case's eyes. Case looked down at him from his lanky height. "Where's Fallon?"

The clock in the station bonged once, and Thorkel listened to the noise of it fade before he answered.

"Why," Thorkel said, "he's up in his house, I guess. I saw him up there about an hour and a half ago."

"Then I guess I'll be going," Case said.

"I tried to get him to go hide in the mountains, Tod, but he wouldn't. He'll be around. You come and eat that venison. You wouldn't want to hurt Mowbrie's feelings, after he's worked so hard on it. Fallon'll be around. No need to hurry."

Case smiled. "That's good, Jim. You know, Jim, I kind of thought you'd be against me, with your job and all."

"I'm not against you, Tod. I never have been. I'm pretty damn happy to have you home again, and I've got lots of plans for us, and a special one for you."

"I kind of thought with your job and all, you and me would be rubbing each other the wrong direction—to say the least."

"Well," Thorkel said, "I kind of thought we could talk things over on this hunt."

Case shook his head slowly, smiling. "I'm catching a rattler out of here at five o'clock, Jim. Back down to Butte."

Thorkel stared at a bright nail-head sticking out of a board just in front of Case's toe. "No, you aren't, Tod," he said. "I made up my mind we're going on this hunt." He looked up. "We had a damned good time in the old days, Tod. I made up my mind it's going to be that way again, and not you," he ended, "hanging on a rope." His eyes were steady on Case.

Case shook his head slowly and smiled. "I won't be hanging on any rope, Jim. Not me."

Thorkel nodded and said mildly, "I know you won't, Tod. We're going on this hunt like I planned. The three of us together. Let's go. Mowbrie's waiting."

He turned and walked back toward the horses, listening to the thump of Case's heels on the boards behind him.

Case caught up with him and grabbed his elbow hard. "Do me a favor, Jim," Case said. "Keep out of this, will you? Just stay out of the way today. That's all."

Thorkel looked at him without expression. "We better eat before that venison gets dry, Tod. Mowbrie's taken a lot of pains over your welcome-home dinner. You wouldn't want to spoil it, now, would you?" He mounted his horse and wheeled it up the street without looking at Case again, or waiting for an answer.

THOSE who saw the two riders coming up the street subdued their curiosity and looked away, prudently moving back inside stores, or if they were caught too far away from a door, faced the windows to stare at the goods on display. One of the three hands in the saloon accidentally came out as Thorkel and Case passed the sheriff's office. He took one look at Case's stubbly head and went back through the swing doors for another snort.

Case watched him, controlling the contempt on his face, and followed Thorkel into the livery through the high, dark doorway. "Lice," he said in the gloom, swinging down and loosening his cinch. "I paid ten times, a hundred times what I owed, and not one of them has the guts to say hello."

Thorkel slipped a halter over his horse's head and said nothing.

"You ought to spend two years in a prison laundry if you want to learn about people," Case said in the dark, his voice twanging harshly. "The rotten scuts. You got to get low down to see behind their rotten fronts."

"That's what I figured," Thorkel said mildly, "when I got you this job."

"Job?"

"Hunting lions for the stock association," Thorkel said indifferently, turning

toward the rear of the barn and the back door. "I figured you could take it out on the lions."

He led Case through the small rear door into the back yard. At the rear of the lot stood a rough board shack. Smoke curled up from a rusty stovepipe. Three barred-rock chickens pecked and scratched among the woodchips that littered the ground around a great pile of unsplit stovewood.

"Some outfit," Case said, following Thorkel across the yard.

"We like it fine," Thorkel said. "You can use it as a base camp. You can come down from the mountains at Thanksgiving and Christmas and we'll have some good parties and spend all your bounties."

"Hens," Case said. "My God, you birds have sure changed. Who belongs to the hens?"

"We divide what the rats leave us," Thorkel answered, packing stovewood into the crook of his elbow from a pile against the side of the shack. "The rats have eaten so many chickens they are growing feathers, Case. I figured with you around, we'd do better."

He yanked the latch-thong and kicked open the door. "Here he is," he said into the dusk of the room, and threw his stovewood into the box beside the stove.

Mowbrie lifted his head from where he was stooped in front of the oven with a ladle full of beer in his hand. He had washed his face, but there was still soot in the wrinkles, and the black lines began to twist around into smiles and grins as he saw Case in the door, as though he were trying to pack two or three smiles into one at the same time.

"Holy cow," he said, and laughed. "It's the leaping bull elk of the woods with a haircut!" He jumped into the air, silently clapping his hands, and scurried to a shelf for a bottle. His hand shook as he poured three glasses full. "Sit down," he said, "sit down, for God's sake, the roast is damn near ruint."

Case began to grin, watching Mowbrie, and the grin got broader and warmer. Thorkel slid the roast onto a chipped platter and began slicing it, smiling to himself as the meat fell over like the leaves of a book. He looked up at Case, and then at Mowbrie. "Just like old times," he said, handing out plates. "Just like old—"

The star fell off his shirt into the platter and lay there in the juice. He stopped grinning and looked at it, and then slowly picked it up.

CASE and Mowbrie sat and watched him looking at it, their faces without expression. He saw their eyes on him. He started to lay it aside on the table, and stopped himself. He sat there with the star in his hand while they watched. Then slowly he bent the worn pin straight and refastened it to his shirt. They looked away.

They began to eat in silence, knives and forks clicking on plates, while Thorkel sat looking fixedly at the venison on the platter.

"What time is it?" Case asked.

Thorkel glanced at a clock on the shelf. "Half past one," he said. He took a small drink from his glass of whisky, and then set it down and waited for the others to finish.

Case laid down his tools and pushed back his chair. He sat looking around the shack.

"Pretty comfortable, ain't it?" Mowbrie asked. Case looked over the two neat bunks at one end and the patched-up easy chairs. There were three bedrolls stacked in a corner and three sets of saddlebags beside them. Four rifles and a shotgun stood in a rack against the wall by the door. "I got to go."

"Why don't you get out of that suit?" Thorkel asked. "We kept your clothes. They're over in the corner behind the blanket."

Case hesitated.

"Go on. Put your own clothes on. You don't want to go out of here with that suit on, anyway."

Case stood up and began stripping.

Thorkel kept watching him as he rustled around in the corner behind the blanket, throwing out pieces of clothing. "It's pretty good in the evening to come in here and sit down, Tod, and know there's nobody looking for you. You can come in here and forget about the doorlatch. You can go to bed and leave the light burning if you like. No sleeping in the thickets. No worrying. No shivering in the brush fifty feet from your fire, listening for

something when you want to sleep."

Case stood buttoning on a shirt, starting at the top and working his way down. There wasn't a pinch of fat on him anywhere, and the long, thin muscles that went with his lanky build moved around like ropes under his pale skin.

"It won't be so bad," he said. "I seen Mabel Kinsey in Butte. She's a pal of the mayor. She's got a job for me, all ready and waiting."

"That'll be all right," Thorkel said. "Personally, I'd rather be out in the air shooting lions than hiding under Mabel's skirts waiting for her to sell you to the mayor when the reward gets big enough."

Case said nothing. He pulled on his pants and then his boots. He stamped on the floor, getting the feel of them again. "It'll be too bad when she does, Jim. Don't get me wrong. I'd like to stay here. But I don't see how I can. I mean, I've got a job to do, and I have to take what comes after."

"Take another look," Thorkel said quietly. "Mowbrie and me have saved up two hundred and ten dollars for you. You can get yourself a good start on a pack of lion-dogs with that. You can set yourself up in this county and build yourself up to where they hire you all over. The Territory's going to be a state some day, and you can get to work for the government. There's a lot of angles, Tod."

CASE stood still, staring blankly at the bedrolls. "Go on," he said.

"You can live here. There's plenty of room. There's getting to be a heap more women around here now, Tod. Maybe one of these days we'll take a mind to marry up with a good cook, if Mowbrie should ever get tired of baking his face on the stove. How old are you, Tod?"

"Thirty," Case said. "Thirty or thirty-one."

"Old," Thorkel said. "And me twenty-nine. Ten years ago we could take anything. We got a start for you here, Tod."

Case looked down at him sombrely. "Not with Fallon in this town," he said. "I couldn't live here."

Thorkel drew a deep breath and changed his position in the chair. "Fallon isn't that important, Tod. Sure, it would be fine killing Fallon. I could have killed him myself this morning, just for hanging around with you coming back. But you aren't a damn fool, Tod. You aren't going to throw away forty years just to shoot a lousy little rat like Fallon, just to make yourself feel good for a minute. My God, use your brains!"

Case looked at the clock. "Where's my old guns? This thing Mabel gave me ain't worth a damn."

Thorkel looked at the floor.

"They're back behind the clothes," Mowbrie said slowly, watching Thorkel. "You wouldn't want him to fight a man with a no-good gun, would you, Jim?"

Thorkel looked at the bedrolls in the corner. "You poor damn fool," he said. "They'll catch you, Tod, sure as hell, and it'll mean hanging. Mabel Kinsey and the mayor aren't going to help you if the Territory gets after you. They sure won't stop the old man, either, once he gets going."

Case brought a heavy cartridge belt out from behind the blanket and strapped it on. He went over to the gun-rack, found a new box of cartridges on the floor underneath it, and replaced the cartridges in his belt with fresh ones. He loaded his guns quickly and went over to the saddlebags.

"Maybe I won't go back down to Butte, Jim. Maybe I'll take off to the mountains. What kind of suff you got packed to eat, Mowbrie?"

Mowbrie looked miserably at the remains of his venison, cold on the table. "Tod, don't do it. They'll get you sure. Damn it all, Tod, I packed up for a ram hunt, not for a getaway."

"Same thing," Case said. "I kind of figured maybe you'd like to come along. Ever been to Denver? Ever been to San Francisco? Ever get tired of shoeing horses?"

Thorkel looked at him coldly. "The thing you need most in the world is a damn good beating, Tod."

Case whirled. "I never been beat in my life, Jim. Don't you think you can start. Just stay out of this. I don't want no shooting between you and me. Mowbrie, you want to help me a little?"

"He can't," Thorkel said. "If he helps you, he'll hang with you."

Mowbrie sat hunched in his chair. "You sure you going to do this, Tod?"

"Dead sure. I owe Fallon a killing. Two years I put in the pen, and for what? Swiping ten lousy cows. And why? Not 'cause I was doing any different than anybody else around here. You know it goes on all the time. You know as well as I do the outfits spend half their time trying to steal each other blind. Not for any reason, just because Fallon hated my guts, that's all. How'd he know what I was doing if he wasn't doing it himself? They wasn't even his cows. And two years I spent for his lousy grudge, that's all. And now I'm going up there and put a bullet in his guts and watch him holler. And by God, every time he hollers, I'm going to kick him in the teeth. I'm going to make that son wish he hadn't never been borned."

He stood tense in the middle of the room, his sharp face tight and hot. The others sat silent.

"And if you want to help, Mowbrie, you can bring out one of them saddlebags and bedrolls where I can pick them up after." He glanced at Thorkel. "I'll tell you where later. And if you feel like coming along, bring your own roll too." He walked to the rifle rack and picked out an old Winchester. He stood working it over.

CHAPTER THREE

"There He Is—Get Him!"

THORKEL looked at Mowbrie steadily. "You aren't that big a fool. You aren't going to throw away the livery and all."

Mowbrie looked at nothing. "You'll be after him, Jim. That's your job. But I didn't swear to nothing."

Thorkel looked over at Case. "I didn't figure on this. I didn't figure you'd wreck your friends. Maybe I can't stop you from wrecking yourself, but I can keep you from dragging him into it." He walked to the door and stood with his back to it.

Case turned and looked at him. "Get away from that door," he said with the rifle in his hand. Mowbrie stood up quickly. Case walked up to Thorkel, the rifle ready. "I told you," he said softly, "to get away from that door."

"Put down that gun, you big lanky louse and fight like a man. I'm sick of arguing with you."

Case dropped the rifle and lashed out at Thorkel's head. As Thorkel ducked and came up swinging, Mowbrie let out a yell and dashed toward them. Thorkel's fist crunched into Case's nose. Case swung as Mowbrie dashed between them, and his fist caught Mowbrie in the side of the jaw.

Mowbrie went down like a sack full of rocks. Case stood looking at him where he lay on the floor, huddled up with his arm under his head. He blinked slowly and a peculiar look came over his face.

"Damn you to hell," Thorkel said, "you lousy hound, you come back here full of murder and now look what you've done. It ain't just Fallon, you'll kill everybody that gets in your way." He leaped over Mowbrie, flying into Case like a wildcat. Case staggered away backward, trying to defend himself as Thorkel's fists battered his face.

"Wait, Jim, wait!" he yelled, flopping back onto the table. It crashed over, and the venison skidded toward the stove. Case hit the boards with his rump. Thorkel stood panting. "Get up, you no-good son! I'm going to beat you till you damn well cry. Get up!"

"Lay off," Case protested from the floor. "Get poor Mowbrie. Damn it, I'm sorry, Jim, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hit poor Mowbrie, I swear it, Jim." He struggled to his feet and hurried past Thorkel, ignoring his fists, to Mowbrie, and knelt on the floor beside him. "God, is he kilt?"

"You hit him hard enough," Thorkel said. "But what the hell do you care? You were going to hang him a minute ago. What do you care if you broke his neck? Why don't you shoot him where he lies, you big, damned fool, and make sure?" He went over and helped Case get Mowbrie onto a chair.

"He's breathing," Case said. "I guess he's all right." Case's nose was running blood down into his mouth, but he wasn't noticing it.

"Pick up that venison before he comes to and sees it laying on the floor," Thorkel said, his voice hard and bitter. "He worked all morning over it for you, you damn mean son, and here you go and knock him

in the head. It isn't enough you go hang yourself killing Fallon, you've got to hang him too and get me kicked out of town for being your friend."

Case blinked rapidly at Mowbrie's white face.

"Even if you hated Fallon's guts, you could have forgotten it if you gave a damn for your friends. But no, you've got to ruin us right with you, just to satisfy yourself. If you make a move for Fallon, I'll kill you in the street. I won't have Mowbrie ruined."

MOWBRIE'S eyes fluttered open. Case swallowed and gulped with relief. He hurried over to the venison and replaced it in the roasting pan. He stood by the stove while Mowbrie blinked bewilderedly around.

"What the hell was that?" Mowbrie asked, rubbing his jaw.

Case glanced worriedly at Thorkel. "It was me, Mowbrie. I swear to God it was an accident."

"Accident," Mowbrie said, looking glumly at the floor. "I'd hate to see what you'd do on purpose. I take back what I said, Tod. I ain't going to help you no more. I want you should go up and kill Fallon like you said, or shut up and sit down and act peaceable. I done all I could," he said, looking at the venison. "I'm through."

Case looked at Thorkel. "What'll I do?"

"Give me your word you'll leave Fallon alone."

Case looked at Mowbrie and slowly raised his right hand.

The door of the shack shoved in and the old man stood in the doorway, his guns tied down and his face grim. Case looked around at him.

"Go ahead, Tod," Thorkel said loudly. "Swear it. Andy, I want you to hear this."

"All right, I'll swear it. I'll leave Fallon be."

Thorkel looked at the old man and the old man looked at the blood on Case's swelling nose.

"That's good," he said. "Jim, you going hunting now?"

"Why?"

"Now would be a good time. Fallon's half drunk. He just come in the office, looking for Case. I guess he got scared waiting up at the house, and started drinking. And now he's left his uncles and come down all by himself." He looked at Case. "He's full of booze and bullcrap and says you're a lousy coward cause you didn't show up at the house like you said you would. I guess you can see how he figured."

He looked at the remains of venison on the table. "He's up at the saloon now. Jim. It would be a damn good time to go on your hunt. He'll sober up and cool off by the time you get back."

Thorkel picked up his hat. "He'll never sober up if he thinks Case is scared of him Come on, Case. I got to settle this once and for all."

"Wait a minute," the old man snarled as Thorkel herded Case past him through the door. "Where d'you think you're going?"

"I'm sick of damn' fool threats of killings," Thorkel said, marching Case away toward the barn. "I'm going to put an end to it for good." The old man cursed and hurried after them.

THE STREET lay white-hot in the sun, emptied even of dogs. Thorkel turned up the boardwalk toward the saloon, keeping ahead of Case.

Inside the saloon, Fallon was shouting at the bartender at the top of his voice, cursing Case with every name he knew. Thorkel stopped at the swing doors, putting out a hand to keep Case behind him.

Thorkel stepped in, and Fallon whirled, his hand flying to the gun on his hip.

"Keep away," Fallon said. "I seen you once today and you tried to soft-talk me. I know you're a friend of his. And now the lousy scut's scared to face me, and I guess you want me to let him go. Is that it?"

"Give me that gun," Thorkel said quietly, standing in front of the doors. "Case has sworn he won't bother you. He wouldn't hurt you now if he had you hog-tied. I want you to talk to him."

"It's a lousy trick. Wait'll I catch him, I'll talk to him all right." Fallon drew his gun. "Now get out of here."

"Give me the gun," Thorkel said, advancing.

"Don't come no closer," Fallon said.

"You wouldn't want my gun if you was on the level. Stay back. Just stay to hell away from me!"

Thorkel stood looking at Fallon's pistol for a moment, and then, jumping aside, drew and fired. Fallon's gun crashed, the bullet splintering the doorjamb, and Thorkel fired again. Fallon's gun spun out of his hand and skidded across the floor.

Fallon bent over, clutching his numbed hand, and backed away as Thorkel walked up to him. He ran up against the bar and stood there.

Thorkel grabbed him by the shirt and said, "Now listen, you lousy little rat, I've had enough trouble already with this fight. I got Case to keep the peace, and I'm going to make you." He turned to the doors and called Case's name. Case came in. Fallon gave a cry and Thorkel grabbed him as he tried to run.

"Murder!" Fallon yelled, struggling to get away as Case came up. The doors swung in, and the old man stood there with his guns in his hands and a nasty look in his eyes.

Case stood looking down at Fallon for a moment, studying the terror-stricken face and the frantic eyes. He looked up at Thorkel. "It's funny," he said suddenly. "I've been dreaming of killing this little hound for two years, and now I look at him, why, hell, I'm ashamed of myself, that I would hurt such a poor, contemptible little thing."

He crossed the floor to Fallon's gun, came back with it and stuck it in Fallon's holster.

"Let go of him, Jim," Case said. "If he wants to shoot me like he said, why, let him go ahead now and try. I'll give him the draw. I won't bust my word to you."

Thorkel let go. Fallon stood alone, staring at Case.

"Go ahead," Thorkel said to Fallon. "You wanted him. There he is now, get him."

FALLON stood frozen, his eyes nearly popping out of their sockets.

"Well, by God, if you aren't going to shoot him, then shake hands and make peace."

"I'd ruther shake hands with a cockroach," Case said.

"Shake hands!" Thorkel said in a voice that made Case's eyes open. He put out his hand gingerly, and Fallon touched it as though it would burn him through to the bone.

"That's all," Thorkel said, and walked past the old man out the door and into the sunshine.

Case turned and followed. Fallon's arm made an instinctive move toward his gun, and then dropped to his side. He stood there with a stupid look on his face and watched Case go.

"Let's get started," Thorkel said as Case came out. "Tell Mowbrie to pack up. We can make the meadows by dark tonight and get into the mountains tomorrow."

Case looked at the old man. "You got anything to say to me, Sheriff? If you have, say it now."

The old man looked back, chomped his cud twice and almost smiled. "Nope," he said.

Case turned and loped off down the boardwalk.

The old man looked at Thorkel. People began to come back out of the stores, and stared curiously at them, and at Case going down the walk. But there was no talk from the passers-by.

"Was you going somewhere?" the old man asked softly. "Did you say something about the mountains?"

"Yes," Thorkel said. "Us three. Like old times."

"I guess you'll do," the old man said. "I didn't know this morning but what maybe you'd disappoint me, son." He smiled. "I guess almost any damned fool can kill a man. Bring me back something good to eat, will you, son? Get damn' hungry these days."

Thorkel smiled and nodded. He turned and walked slowly away toward the livery.

The old man watched him for a moment, and then noted a bright, shiny nailhead sticking up out of a board in the sidewalk. He spat, carefully, straight and true, and then sighing with renewed confidence, followed his deputy down the hot and dusty street.

THE END

BRAND OF THE BLOODY O.K.

By L. C. DAVIS

THE Earp - Clanton - McLowery shoot-out at Tombstone's O. K. Corral, October 26, 1881, was probably the most talked about street brawl in frontier history. Twenty-five or thirty shots were fired in one-third of a minute.

It wasn't a sudden outburst of violence, however, that brought showdown between the Earp faction, representing the law, and the Clanton and McLowery boys, members of Curly Bill's outlaw band. Rather it was a series of events which including two stage holdups and the resulting charges and counter-charges.

But the incident that touched things off was provided by Ike Clanton, loud-talking member of the outlaw crew, when he rode alone into the Arizona town the afternoon before and spouted fight talk. He was so confident that the Earps were afraid of him that he parked his rifle and sixgun at the Grand Hotel and started making the rounds of the bars.

He was eating a midnight lunch in the rear of the Alhambra Saloon when Doc Holliday, Wyatt Earp's right-hand man, walked in. Spotting the outlaw, he lost no time in speaking his mind.

"Clanton," Holliday snapped, "I'm getting damned tired of you lying to Earp about me. That Benson holdup wasn't enough. You have to tell more lies!"

Blustering Ike Clanton was profuse in his denials. "But I didn't say nothin'. You've been hearing things, Doc!"

"Not only are you a bare-faced liar," Doc blazed, "but a bragging, yellow coward and a drunken lout. You've been threatening to kill me, too. Well, there was never a better time. Go for your gun!" Doc reached for his.

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"No! No!" Clanton protested. "I ain't got no gun!"

"Don't give me that stuff!" Doc scoffed. "You wouldn't have the guts to go around town without one."

But Clanton still protested that he was unarmed.

"Then go get a gun!" Holliday flung back. "And be ready to use the damn' thing when you come back."

At this moment Morgan Earp walked in, took Holliday by the arm and led him outside. Clanton followed, still trying to placate Holliday, who continued to heap abuse upon the outlaw.

Deputy United States Marshal Wyatt Earp and City Marshal Virgil Earp hove into view and the argument ended when the city marshal threatened to jail both of the men.

Still protesting that he was unarmed when he met Holliday, Clanton began his fight talk when he met Wyatt Earp a half hour later at the Oriental bar.

"But I've got a gun now! Go tell Doc that! Nobody's gonna talk to me like that an' live to tell it!"

"Aw, go to bed and sleep it off," Earp growled. "You're drunk!"

"Like hell I am!" Clanton flared. "An' I think it's just about time we had a showdown!"

"I don't fight until I'm forced to," Earp said calmly. "There's no future in it."

They argued some more. After a while Clanton went away, only to return a short time later and order another drink. He gazed moodily into the back bar mirror. Then he turned to go. "My friends will be here tomorrow," he boasted. "Then we'll have this out. Don't forget! Tomorrow!" And he lurched out the door.

Wyatt Earp took little stock in Clanton's drunken boasts and went to bed, but was awakened at noon by Ned Boyle, Oriental bartender. Clanton, he said, was on a high lonesome and threatening mayhem to the Earp clan. Harry Jones, another friend, rushed in as Earp was dressing.

"He's got a Winchester and a sixgun!" Jones reported.

Earp sighed. "Guess I'll have to see what's eatin' Ike," he said.

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MARSHAL VIRGIL EARP was also awakened with the same tidings by his brothers, Warren and Morgan. Ike had been reinforced by Billy Clanton, Tom and Frank McLowery, he said. They were on the warpath.

Morgan Earp also informed Doc Holliday that Clanton meant to kill him as soon as he saw him.

"So I've been informed," Holliday said calmly as he stood at the bar of the Alhambra.

Now that Clanton's "friends" were in town, the whole situation took on new interest. Wyatt and Virgil decided they had better disarm Ike. Virgil saw him first, on Fourth street.

"Were you looking for me?" the marshal inquired.

Clanton swung the Winchester menacingly and Virgil brought the barrel of his sixgun down on the outlaw's head.

Wyatt and Morgan saw what was going on, and they disarmed Clanton and took him to Justice Wallace's court. While the marshal went to find the judge, Wyatt and Morgan remained on guard. When Virgil returned, Wyatt walked outside, where he saw Tom McLowery.

"I'll fight you any old time!" McLowery blustered.

"Fine!" Earp replied quickly. "How about right now?" He slapped the bandit across the mouth with his left hand and drew his sixgun with his right. When McLowery refused to draw, Earp gunwhipped him.

Moments later the "Lion of Tombstone" was puffing on a cigar in front of Hafford's bar when Billy Clanton and the McLowery boys passed him, sixguns swinging at their hips. They exchanged baleful glares and the three outlaws disappeared in a gunsmith's shop a half block away. In front of it Frank McLowery's horse was on the walk.

Earp walked up that way, grasped the horse's bridle. So did the horse's owner. The others played their hands above gun butts.

"Get his nag off the walk!" Earp ordered McLowery. "Don't you know it's against the law?"

The outlaw scowled and obeyed. Ike Clanton, who had just paid a twenty-five

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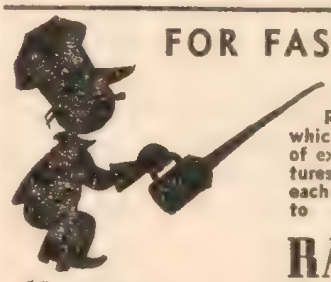

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A POPULAR PUBLICATION

dollar fine in Judge Wallace's court, walked by, but since he was unarmed again, he disdained Earp's presence and went into the gunsmith's, ostensibly to rearm himself.

But all the others were armed. However, Tom McLowery, who had all the fight clubbed out of him by Earp, decided to leave his gun in Moses & Mehan's saloon, unknown to the law officers.

Sheriff John H. Behan's face was being lathered in a barber shop on Allen Street when rumblings of the showdown reached his ears.

"Hurry up!" he ordered the barber. "I gotta stop this!"

A few moments later he hurried, pink-faced and smelling of talcum and bay rum, out onto the street. He noted the grim lawmen stationed at different points. Virgil Earp was closest.

"What's going on, Marshal?" he asked breathlessly.

"Bunch of polecats in town looking for trouble."

"Do your duty, then," he said unctiously. "Disarm them!"

"They're spoilin' for a fight," Virgil said crisply. "An' we aim to give 'em their belly full."

"Very well. Then *I'll* disarm them!"

He found the four outlaws in a vacant lot near the O. K. corral. There was a fifth man, young Billy Claiborne.

The sheriff pompously announced that he was going to arrest the lot of them and take their guns away. Ike was still unarmed, he said. Tom McLowery and Billy Claiborne said they were, too. But the others refused to surrender their arms unless the Earps did.

THE stage was now set for the fight and the curtain was about to rise on the last act. The four lawmen of the Earp faction were standing on the corner of Fourth and Allen streets when news reached them that the outlaws were all set and waiting for them. They turned the corner of Fourth Street and began the march down Fremont Street, four abreast, their faces grim. The time was 2:30 o'clock in the afternoon.

Holliday, on the outside of the boardwalk, wore a gray overcoat that covered

a neat gray suit and concealed a sawed-off shotgun strapped to his shoulder. Morgan Earp was next to him. Wyatt Earp, the third man, wore a long black overcoat, in the pocket of which he grasped a sixgun. Virgil Earp was on the inside.

The Clantons and McLowerys stood in a vacant lot near the corral. Sheriff Behan made another attempt to stop the lawmen but they brushed past him and faced the outlaws. They drew their guns.

Wyatt Earp spoke first. "You've been asking for it. Well, here it is!"

"Put up your hands!" Virgil Earp ordered.

Eighteen-year-old Billy Clanton aimed his sixgun at Wyatt Earp, but Frank McLowery was more dangerous and Earp aimed his first shot at him. Wyatt got McLowery in the stomach while Morgan

shot young Clanton. Both men, though wounded, fought back. McLowery staggered into the street while Billy fell against the wall of a dwelling, slid to the ground and arose on one knee.

Tom McLowery ran to get his brother's rifle out of the saddle scabbard, but Doc Holliday wasn't to be caught napping. Swinging the sawed-off scattergun into action, he let McLowery have both barrels. The double charge of buckshot broke the outlaw in the middle. The two horses belonging to Billy Clanton and Frank McLowery went tearing down the smoke-filled street, stirrups flapping.

Chicken-hearted Ike Clanton, instigator of the bluff that failed, grabbed Wyatt Earp's arm, trying to distract him, but Earp flung him aside. He then fled into

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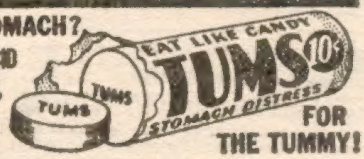

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Fly's photograph gallery, where Billy Claiborne had gone when the ball opened.

But Ike didn't stop at the studio. He kept on going, out the back door, dodged a couple of bullets flung at him by Doc Holliday, and hid in a Mex dancehall.

Although mortally wounded, Billy Clanton and Frank McLowery continued the fight. Billy was on one knee, Frank on both feet, but weaving groggily. Young Clanton was using both hands to fire his gun, and he managed to nick Virgil Earp in the calf of his leg and Morgan Earp in the shoulder. McLowery sighted Holliday.

"Gotcha this time, Doc!" he snarled.

"Like hell!" Doc snapped. He turned his thin body, emaciated by consumption, to one side, affording a slim target, and the bullet creased his thigh. McLowery then drew near to Morgan Earp, who had been downed by Billy's bullet. Wyatt shouted a warning to his brother who turned over and snapped off a shot. Doc Holliday fired at the same time and McLowery died with a bullet in his brain.

"Gotta kill one of you before I go!" Billy Clanton gritted, but try as he would, he couldn't cut it. Another bullet by Virgil finished him, and he died a few minutes later in a doctor's office—with his boots off, to fulfill a promise to his mother.

When the smoke of battle cleared, three of the four outlaws were dead, and the other "missing," while three of the four lawmen were wounded, none seriously. Only Wyatt Earp, the "Lion of Tombstone," was unscathed.

(Continued from page 6)

Such iron-gutted fighting men as these were a part of the great and glorious pageant that was the early warrior West, and all contributed—as we of *Dime Western Magazine* try to do in our fictional recreations of that wild and woolly period—to the fame of a great country.

Next month, incidentally, we will publish an issue that we figure is about tops in top-hand Western story-telling, featuring dramatic novels, novelettes and shorts, by Thomas Thompson, George Appell and others, writers whose stories throb to the vigorous heartbeat of the Old West.

June Dime Western—out May 4!

THE EDITOR

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